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Future of Corrections

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The Future of Corrections: A View from a State Correctional Administrator

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Writing this article has been a real challenge. When John Conrad asked me to contribute to the "Future of Corrections" issue of the *Prison Journal*, he asked me to address myself to the discrepancies between what *ought* to be and what *can* be done within corrections. In fact, his basic question was, "What developments can be realistically expected of the penal system in a state like Ohio during the next 25 years?"

I have always found it quite easy to think about what "ought" to be. It is almost a refreshing distraction to sit around and discuss with others in our field and "jawbone" about what "should" be done. However, it is much more difficult to try to link the "ought to be's" to the many obstacles facing correctional administrators, imagine the policy implementation problems, and finally, suggest what can be the reality of corrections in the next 25 years.

Professor Conrad's challenge to me is not one I take lightly, and I have attempted to incorporate my academic training, correctional experience, and struggles as a state administrator into my best estimate of the future of corrections. I will first examine the factors influencing what can be accomplished, the past few decades leading up to today, the "ought to be's" for our future, and, finally, project what that future might bring.

Factors That Influence the Future of Corrections

The most critical problem in linking what should be done and what can realistically be done is the tremendous turnover of correctional administrators within our state systems. While I knew the turnover was high, I was still surprised recently to hear that the average tenure of a state correctional administrator is 27 months! In my own career I have often changed assignments within two to three years. It was not until I had the opportunity to remain in my current position for almost five years that I really recognized the importance of stability in leadership to an organization. It takes two years just to decide what needs to be accomplished, and set the organizational agenda for change. In Ohio, we had a general four-year plan. We used the first year to determine what to do, made changes the second year, refined and fine-tuned those changes the third year, and institutionalized those changes the fourth year. I have found that even four years takes an aggressive effort, and five to six years is not too long a time to try to implement major changes.

I can't overemphasize the importance of making new concepts a permanent part of an organization's operation. People in organizations tend not to stick with what they do not yet have ownership of, and noninstitutionalized concepts will rapidly revert to the old ways and patterns of doing business.

Let me now address the latitude a correctional administrator has in making major changes in corrections. The administrator runs the operation of a corrections system. However, decisions regarding correctional options for sentencing —to include who goes to prison and who stays in the community, release decisions, and length of

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sentences – are usually not within the purview of a corrections department. With these issues, the correctional administrator may have very little input, and must work with many other policymakers and groups to effect even a marginal impact. This problem, compounded with short tenure, makes it almost impossible to have major impact. Even when the administrator has longer tenure, it takes skill, support from many groups, cooperation from elected officials, and an ability to take advantage of windows of opportunity to make any major changes.

The windows of opportunity I reference are a measuring of public opinion —or the perception of elected officials of public opinion— about correctional issues. Many people argue that the correctional administrator has a responsibilty to lead public opinion. Others say that the administrator does not, and should simply carry out the mandates or existing laws regarding correctional policy.

In my mind, neither of these positions is really the most effective. I do not believe correctional administrators can make a major change in public opinion; however, they should responsibly educate the public about the realities and complexities of the correctional dilemma. For instance, most people believe criminal sentences are too lenient. Correctional administrators should somehow try to provide the public with a perspective on what the sentences in their jurisdictions really are. Comparisons with other jurisdictions or changes in sentences over time may be relevant. But, more importantly, administrators should provide credible costs —both tangible and intangible— of various sentencing options. It is then up to others to decide whether to pay for longer prison sentences or to look for community alternatives. I believe the administrator's responsibility must include encouraging rational decisions based on full information. They must aggressively attempt to correct misinformation and constantly discourage others from trying to come up with easy solutions to complex issues.

How Did We Get to Where We Are Today?

In reviewing the recent history of corrections, we see some major changes in policy. In the 1960's and early 1970's, there was a great effort to rehabilitate offenders and to emphasize community-based correctional programming, thereby reducing the number of offenders sent to prison. As a result, there was a tremendous expansion of community programs. Society was willing to tolerate a higher risk of recidivism or additional criminality to give inmates a chance to change their ways by improving their skills in the community rather than in what was sometimes perceived as the deleterious environment of prison. However, there was no proof that community programming was a success. Crime rates did not go down, nor did recidivism rates reduce dramatically.

Since the late 1970's, the public has become much less tolerant of crime and deviancy. We want an emphasis on public safety and reduced risks of further crime. Society is less concerned about the rehabilitative aspects of correctional policy, and more concerned about the incapacitation of offenders. Generally, the argument is that if we cannot rehabilitate, we should keep people in prison so they cannot commit further crimes against society. There are now continuous pressures to lengthen sentences, make release of inmates more difficult, and raise the severity of punishment for certain offenses.

Unfortunately, during the "Rehabilitative Era" of the 1960's and 1970's, there were too many promises about what could be done with offenders: that treatment would change their behavior and that rates of recidivism would be reduced. Perhaps the greatest lesson during that period was: Don't promise more than you can accomplish.

Today, we in corrections generally retreat to safer areas and focus our efforts on improving the management, operations, and efficiency within our correctional systems. Because of this concentration, there is no doubt in my mind that correctional programs are much better managed than they used to be. Training of employees, improved security measures and technology, emphasis on staff supervision and modern management techniques, and an increased focus on professionalism have improved corrections in the United States.

What Ought To Be Done

Let me now take my turn to visualize what the future of corrections *should* bring. I will only make suggestions in two areas: sentencing options and lengths and prison environments. Simply put, there should be a full utilization of all sentence options and analysis of how offender types should relate to sentence lengths. Additionally, prisons should focus on the basics —being safe, secure, humane, and decent— with an emphasis on work as the basis of inmate programs.

The demand for prison beds forces the continued re-analysis of who should go to prison, and for how long. The public generally will allow a rehabilitative emphasis for nonserious offenders, but want a punitive focus for repeat, serious, or violent offenders. Therefore, sentences will continue to be enhanced and release procedures toughened for serious repeat or violent offenders. To ensure the availability of scarce prison beds to hold this category of offenders for the long periods society wants them to serve, there will be a necessary deflection of the less-severe offenders into community supervision rather than prison. The public will realize that every offender cannot go to prison. The choice will be that those most dangerous and the highest risk to society will go to prison for long periods of time and others will have the opportunity for community punishment, sanctions, and supervision.

The second area of emphasis should be a renewed focus on prison programming dealing with development of an appropriate environment for handling long-term offenders. Prisons will have a higher concentration of serious long-term offenders, and therefore prison design, security, and inmate programs must respond to the change. Incentives and disincentives should be offered which are immediate or short-term in nature. Generally, the biggest incentive for inmate program involvement or good behavior is hope of release. However, when someone is serving ten to fifteen years prior to release eligibility, he or she will require more immediate response to their behavior. Classification systems which allow moving to institutions with more privileges and program opportunities, as well as a good inmate disciplinary system, are most important in this regard.

Inmate programming should be focused on work. A recent National Institute of Corrections-sponsored study on long-term offenders emphasized the importance of work and penal industries as a program need for these offenders. Other studies of inmate work programs have emphasized the need to link education and training to inmate work assignments. Therefore, inmate programming should tie education, training, and work; should have requirements of certain educational and training levels to get specific jobs; and should be based on inmate skills, aptitude and interests. Ohio has recently begun to redirect program efforts in this regard. The OHIO PLAN is an effort to make education and training, linked to productive work opportunities, the key programmatic aspect of our facilities. In this regard, we think we will create a more active and productive environment within our prisons, and hopefully better prepare offenders for entering the work force upon release. However, such training and work

experience should not necessarily be designed to meet the needs of community preparation as much as to meet the needs of institutional operations and the needs of the inmate while in prison.

The Next 25 Years

Even though I cited the obstacles for correctional change, I do believe that the future will be very positive for corrections. Changes will not come about from a major redirection in philosophy, but will be the result of a need to treat prison beds as a scarce commodity and of competing interests for spending public dollars. Correctional operations are now and will become even a larger part of any state budget. There will finally be a halt to expansion of prisons in order to keep costs down. There are many things that elected officials would rather spend taxpayer money on than running prisons. As there is more competition among education, human services, and corrections for funding, there will be a mandate to find less expensive options to maintaining control and supervision of offenders.

Obviously, we have seen a tremendous increase in the number of state prisoners in the past ten years. The population is basically made up of two factors, the number of inmates sent to prison and how long they stay. The issue of how many are sent to prison is basically one of sentencing options. Over the past ten years, the percent of offenders receiving probation has reduced and the percent sent to prison, increased. In the future, I believe this "in or out" decision will level off, and the trend may actually reverse.

With high costs limiting the expansion of prison beds, and these beds seen as a scarce commodity, there will be an expanded acceptance of and reliance on "selective incapacitation" as a measure of crime control. Offenders identified as career criminals or serious repeat offenders will receive extremely long sentences. This will lead to less serious, nonviolent offenders being supervised in the community.

However, there will be a demand for reducing the risk of further criminality for those offenders allowed to remain in the community. We will see an expansion of programs and an increase in the supervision of these offenders. I think there will be further expansion of the use of sophisticated and "high-tech" supervision devices. Methods such as computerized bracelets which can tell whether offenders have left their home will be used more extensively. This is not necessarily because they will be effective or they really reduce the opportunity for those so inclined to commit further crimes. Rather, they can create the impression of reducing risk and increase public confidence that such offenders can be supervised safely in the community. While not dwelling on the use of electronic bracelets as an option, I use this merely as an example of how there will be increased use of technology to assist in supervising nonserious offenders in the community.

Many people feel that the prison construction boom is winding down. However, I believe there will be at least one more surge before we get to the point where we can no longer afford to build and operate additional prisons. The current emphasis on longer sentences for drug offenders and on sentencing and release decision redesign with a focus on community safety will continue to drive the need for additional prison beds for at least the next five years. The emphasis during this time will be on how to build less expensive prisons. The National Institute of Justice has spent considerable effort on construction methods which are more affordable to state and local governments. Recently, private construction and operation of prisons were thought to be other methods to reduce costs of adding prison beds. However, it has not been shown that this is the

case, and most people now recognize private operations are no less expensive. As such, private involvement is not expected to have a major impact on the future of corrections.

What should and will change dramatically are programs within institutions. As stated above, there will be a considerable lengthening of time that inmates will spend in prison. Programming for long-term inmates will be the major emphasis for correctional administrators for the next several years. A higher percent of a state's inmate population will require "close" and maximum security status, as longer sentences increase the risk of escape and result in an increased "hardening" of the inmate population.

For the good of prison operations, control of inmates, and preparation for release, prisons must re-emphasize the work ethic as a part of the inmates' programs. Basic education and literacy training, job aptitude testing and career counseling, and assignment of inmate jobs matched to skills and training will be the most prevalent part of inmate programs. There will continue to be psychological, substance-abuse, and religious programming. But for the long-term population, the emphasis must be on work and the development of a work environment as closely paralleling and relevant to the outside world as possible.

Summing up, those of us responsible for the housing and treatment of many thousands of criminal offenders must look to various sources for assistance. We must look to our professional leadership and find ways to extend tenure and increase stability. We must look to the citizens we serve for input in creating acceptable community-based alternatives to incarceration. At the same time, we must accept the responsibility for educating the public and officials by providing the facts on the costs of prison beds, and live up to assurances of safety regarding community placement.

We must carefully assess the risks and possibilities of each offender, using our prison beds for those who present a threat to society, and develop ways to adequately supervise and control those under community placements. We should redirect our prison programs toward the long-term incarceration of offenders by focusing on productive work and training during their imprisonment.

We are fortunate to be in a positon to learn from a rich and varied history, ranging from strict incapacitation models of incarceration to those which depended heavily on rehabilitation. We can cull the best ideas from the entire history of corrections and write our own future. I for one think the future is bright.