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Jail Operating Costs in California: A Summary of the Issues

Following is the full text of the executive summary of a report produced by the California Board of Corrections titled, *The State of Jails in California: Report #5. Jail Operating Costs*. It is reprinted with the permission of the Board.

This study surveyed jail operating costs for FY 1987-88 in fifteen California counties and twenty specific facilities. The facilities were all constructed and opened since 1980. The sample covered the full range of California counties and the full variety of facility types. The study is reasonably representative of, at least, California's newer facilities, although operating costs in older facilities may be somewhat different.

The study addressed direct costs including personnel salaries and benefits, services and supplies, and contract services with the private sector or with other county departments. Other costs which are attributed, in some studies, to detention were not included. Examples of costs not included in the following discussions include: debt financing; litigation defense and liability payments; county overhead allocable to detention; and "opportunity costs" from diverting land and funding to detention from other uses.

One clear conclusion from the study is that each detention system and each facility is different; each offers varying mixes of services, each houses differing profiles of prisoners. Thus, it should be stressed that figures reported below as averages—costs per day, costs for specific items—are arithmetic averages only and are not intended as norms or standards.

crowding drives overall costs up, but reduces the cost per prisoner.)

4. Two underlying factors explain the level of costs in a system or facility. Costs per citizen for detention systems are closely correlated with incarceration rates: the higher the incarceration rate in a county, the

According to State Controller's Office reports, total jail operating costs in California rose by 55 percent from 1984-85 to 1987-88.

A. Overview

1. According to State Controller's Office reports, total jail operating costs in California rose by 55 percent from 1984-85 to 1987-88. By 1987-88, the total local detention operations bill was \$720 million—roughly \$25.70 per citizen per year.

higher the bill to each taxpayer. Costs per prisoner in systems or specific facilities are closely tied to the staff to inmate ratio: the fewer the inmates per each staff member, the higher the per prisoner cost.

2. In the counties studied for the present report, the costs per citizen averaged nearly \$27 per citizen and ranged from about \$21 to over \$38 per citizen.

5. Among the systems studied, those using non-sworn custody staff had the highest cost per inmate and the fewest inmates per staff. Conversely, systems using only sworn custody staff had, as a group, the lowest cost per inmate and the most inmates per staff. Systems with mixed sworn/civilian custody staff were, as a group, intermediate between all sworn and all civilian systems on cost per inmate and inmates per staff member. Because factors other than staffing may be involved, e.g., all the non-sworn systems were also the smallest detention systems in the study, it should not be assumed that

3. Costs per prisoner in the facilities studied averaged about \$39 per day in high security, pretrial facilities and \$28 per day in dormitory style facilities housing mostly sentenced prisoners. These costs would be higher, especially in the high security facilities, were it not for substantial overcrowding. (Over-

sworn staff systems are "cheaper." However, this finding does suggest that counties should consider *all* factors before assuming that (lower paid) civilianization will result in lower jail operating costs.

B. Staffing

1. For the systems studied, staffing ratios varied from one staff person for every 3.3 prisoners (1:3.3) to 1:8.6. The average staffing ratio was 1:7.7. (These staffing ratios include *all* staff required to run the system, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.) About 65 percent of the staff were responsible for immediate supervision of inmates.

2. Smaller facilities or systems tend to have fewer inmates per staff—indicative of the economies of scale that are possible in larger facilities.

For the systems studied, staffing ratios varied from 1:3.3 to 1:8.6. The average staffing ratio was 1:7.7.

3. High security, predominantly pretrial, facilities had more staff (generally three to six prisoners per staff position) than dormitory-style facilities housing mostly sentenced prisoners (generally seven to thirteen prisoners per staff position). The more intensive staffing in the higher security facilities arises because higher security prisoners, by definition, require closer supervision, and because pretrial facilities tend to have multiple activities, such as intake, medical/mental health

housing, and considerable escorted prisoner movement (e.g., to court) that require additional staff.

C. Cost Factors

1. Salaries and benefits account for about 70 percent of the total detention operating costs. This proportion is somewhat lower in some specific facilities, especially dormitory facilities housing lower security sentenced prisoners.

2. Supplies and service accounts averaged about 18 percent of total operating costs. Food services costs—which are typically included in supplies and services—averaged about 6 percent of total costs. Among systems studied, the average daily cost per prisoner for meals was \$3.46—although there was considerable variation in meal costs. None of the sample counties had retained private food

contractors during the study period. Three counties had meals provided by other county agen-

cies; in these three cases, average daily meal costs were above the average.

3. Maintenance costs typically ranged from 2 to 6 percent of total costs. Utilities costs, which were difficult to obtain and are probably understated, were generally around 4 percent of total operating costs.

4. There was wide variation in medical/mental health costs—ranging from 3 to 20 percent of the

total. The average cost per prisoner per day was \$4.32, although per day costs varied from under \$2 to nearly \$9 for medical/mental health care. Three of the counties studied contracted for private medical/mental health services; all three had daily costs below the average. In general, however, comparison of medical costs was difficult not only because counties have widely different methods of budgeting but also because there are different policies regarding the level of service to be provided in the jails.

5. Transportation costs were not included in the total operating costs, although several counties did provide information on transportation. Costs from those counties ranged from \$125 to \$1,120 per year per prisoner. One major factor appears to be the degree of dispersal of the county's facilities and the proximity of pretrial facilities to the courts.

6. Overhead costs were also excluded from total operating costs. Counties reported an average overhead rate of about 5 percent from Sheriff's Department cost allocations. External overhead rates—from other county departments—were not included in the study.

D. Life Cycle Costs

1. Over a thirty-year life of a jail, "front-end costs"—for planning, design and construction—constitute a small portion of the total expense of running a jail. Even when very conservatively estimated, future operating costs will constitute from 93 to

95 percent of the total county expenditures on the jail. (Among the facilities studied, the high security facilities averaged \$15.7 million in "front-end" costs and \$196.9 million in thirty-year operating costs; dormitory facilities averaged \$8.3 million in front-end costs and \$161.1 million in operating costs.)

2. For the facilities studied, cumulative operating costs surpass the initial design and construction costs very quickly: in 2.4 years for high security facilities and in 1.6 years for dormitory style facilities.

3. These findings underline the importance of careful initial planning of new facilities, with detailed attention to the operating cost implications in all design and construction decisions.

E. Revenues

1. The largest current source of revenues for county detention systems is, in effect, the rental of space to other corrections agencies. In FY 87-88, the counties studied received \$18.5 million from the State Department of Corrections, another \$6 million from Federal authorities, and nearly \$1 million from cities and other counties.

2. A survey of all California counties indicates that about 80 percent of the counties charge fees to participants in detention-related programs: work furlough, home detention, county parole, and work-in-lieu programs.

3. Miscellaneous other revenue sources were also identified. These include Pacific Bell commissions for inmate use of phones, inmate

welfare receipts, and volunteer or other private sector contributions.

4. Counties reported a variety of inmate work activities which generate revenues or reduce or offset costs. (Los Angeles County alone estimates that industries and agricultural programs using inmate workers generate \$13 million—or about 5 percent of total detention system costs—per year in cost-savings and revenues.) The use of inmate workers clearly has promise for helping to control jail operating costs. In addition, counties should insure that ample industries and inmate work space is included in plans for new jail facilities.

Single copies of the full report may be obtained from the NIC Information Center, 1790 30th Street, Suite 130, Boulder, Colorado, 80301; telephone (303) 939-8877. ■

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