

144060

Forging a Major NJ-Corrections Partnership

by Jeremy Travis

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is committed to building a new, constructive partnership with our colleagues in the corrections profession. Within NIJ, we have established an institutional objective of strengthening existing partnerships with the corrections field as well as forging new ties with the many agencies, public and private, at federal, state and local levels, that are engaged in defining the future of our nation's approach to sentencing criminal offenders. We have made this commitment because of the critical role that our society has entrusted to correctional institutions—including prisons and jails, probation and parole—in response to the concerns about crime.

Since the mid-1970s, the nation has witnessed an astounding surge in its correctional population. In contrast to the 50-year period from the early 1920s to the early 1970s, when the incarceration rate per 100,000 general population was a relatively stable 110, the rate in 1980 had risen to 139 and in 1994 had more than tripled to 387. At year end 1994, state and federal prisons and jails held almost 1.5 million inmates, an all-time high and representing about 25 percent of the nation's record 5.1 million-plus persons under some form of correctional supervision. Of those under supervision in the community, about 2.96 million were on probation, 690,000 on parole.

Significant as they are, those statistics just skim the surface of important issues that corrections professionals must try to resolve. For example, not many among the general public realize how the rapid expansion of prison and jail populations creates unique challenges for corrections administrators in such areas as:

- managing institutional growth;
- dealing with staff turnover and burnout;
- recruiting and training additional personnel (and finding the money to do so);

- providing resources to control greater numbers of inmates and also maintain programs for them;
- sustaining staff morale;
- addressing the health and other needs of female, elderly, mentally impaired, substance-abusing and other special offender populations; and
- dealing with the public's clamor when violent inmates must be prematurely released to make room for less violent or nonviolent offenders imprisoned under mandatory sentencing statutes.



Jeremy Travis, director of the National Institute of Justice

Courtesy National Institute of Justice

NIJ's commitment to partnering to help address the challenges facing corrections is evident in many facets of NIJ's operations. For example, that approach permeates *NIJ Research Plan: 1995-1996*, which places special emphasis on research partnerships with other federal agencies (e.g., National Institute of Corrections and the Corrections Program Office of the Office of Justice Programs [OJP]) and with private foundations.

Similarly, prior to developing a special research solicitation relating to the boot camp program under the 1994 Crime Act, NIJ held a strategic plan-

ning session with criminal justice practitioners and researchers to ensure that the solicitation and subsequent awards would address appropriate objectives and priorities.

An important facet of NIJ's new commitment to corrections is our initiative to develop technology that will create a safer and more secure correctional environment. Last May, NIJ's Office of Science and Technology, in cooperation with the National Institute of Corrections, established the Corrections Technology Advisory Council to guide that effort. The following month the Council held its first meeting, in Charleston, S.C., site of one of NIJ's five National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Centers, which provide technical information and assistance to the law enforcement and corrections communities and seek to leverage existing or new resources.

Meeting participants included many leading corrections officials from federal, state and local agencies encompassing prisons, jails and community corrections. They identified technology needs germane to the corrections field and ranked them by importance or necessity. NIJ will now use this listing of priorities to facilitate partnerships among private and public organizations and leverage limited government resources and funding.

NIJ's intensified focus on corrections also is reflected by its initiative on health and justice. Under way since 1993, the initiative is built on prior years' NIJ-sponsored research in areas where health and crime intersect, such as health care in correctional facilities. To help launch the initiative and to provide continuing guidance, NIJ established and collaborates with a working group of professionals who represent a wide spectrum of organizations involved in health and justice.

Flowing from that collaboration are partnerships NIJ has formed with

Continued on page 60

several federal agencies to explore ways to expand understanding of addiction and its various treatment approaches. Moreover, in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NIJ measures periodically the incidence in correctional populations of HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis—and examines correctional policy responses.

Another major health care challenge to corrections is the prevalence of mentally ill inmates. A recent NIJ-sponsored study estimates that of the approximately 10.1 million admissions to jails each year, about 700,000 suffer from acute and severe mental illnesses. To improve the interaction between corrections and community mental health agencies, NIJ has entered into a partnership with the National Institute of Corrections and the Center for Mental Health Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

NIJ-sponsored research also has spotlighted the issue of the cost of correctional health care. Guided by an advisory panel of state and health correctional administrators and representatives from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, NIJ published research findings and recommendations last May in a report entitled *Managing Prison Health Care and Costs*.

NIJ's increased attention to corrections is further exemplified in the area of special offender populations in prisons, including incarcerated mothers. About 75 percent of those women have children, most under 18. Conceived and developed by NIJ, the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program (highlighted in an NIJ Program Focus publication and in the December 1995 issue of *Corrections Today*) promotes involvement of imprisoned mothers in their children's lives through a unique partnership between Girl Scout councils—comprising the world's largest girls/women organization—and state and local corrections agencies. Mother-daughter interaction at the twice-monthly Girl Scout meetings at numerous correctional facilities produces important benefits for inmates and their children,

benefits that can last well after mothers leave prison. In 1996, the program's fourth year, NIJ-fostered Girl Scout-corrections partnerships are likely to be ongoing in as many as 25 states.

Stemming from NIJ's pioneering work on the Girl Scout program, a number of organizations, including the Council of Governors' Policy Advisors, have asked NIJ to take the lead in forming a national working group on children of incarcerated persons. In addition, NIJ is sponsoring preliminary research on parenting programs for incarcerated parents.


A final example of our efforts to cement a stronger partnership with the corrections field is NIJ's developing research initiative on sentencing issues and the consequences of sentencing decisions. This research program will be very broad, exploring the full range of the criminal sanction and encompassing a spectrum of topics ranging from sentencing legislation to parole.

In our preliminary discussions with corrections professionals, they encouraged NIJ to develop a research program that explores the links between sentencing issues and the management of prisons, jails, probation and parole. For example, the NIJ initiative will seek to understand the effect on corrections of such policies as the tougher sentencing guidelines in several states and the increases in mandatory minimum sentences in all states and at the federal level. Exploring the sentencing-corrections connection will shed light on the impact of sentencing policies and legislation on public safety and public sector budgets—an area of research that could include studies of mandatory-minimum, truth-in-sentencing and three-strikes legislation, and the associated costs at various governmental levels.

Other potential topics foreseen by this research initiative include the impact of sentences on the behavior of individual offenders and, whether intended or unintended, on certain categories of offenders, such as racial, ethnic or gender groups and on communities and families; the role of intermediate sanctions and their integration into structured sentencing guidelines; and the institutions and agencies that execute sentences, includ-

ing facilities challenged by institutional crowding and rapid expansion. We also envision an ongoing executive seminar series on the use and consequences of the criminal sanction, a seminar bringing together researchers and senior correctional officials and similar to the NIJ-sponsored executive sessions that explored community policing issues in the 1980s.

NIJ is not developing the sentencing initiative's research agenda in a vacuum. For example, we are working closely with OJP's Corrections Program Office, which will be implementing the 1994 Crime Act's prison provisions. We have written to more than 50 professional organizations and other interested groups asking for their views on the issues and questions they feel are most important or will have the greatest potential impact. And through focus groups consisting of leading researchers and practitioners, we obtain insights into not only which issues are most important but also how, in terms of research methodology, they can be studied most productively. It is our hope that these efforts will result in a research solicitation on the interrelated issues of sentencing and corrections, released in the spring of 1996, that will set our course for years to come.

In all our efforts, we value the views and perspectives of the practitioners who are charged with implementing society's responses to crime. In the particular case of the corrections field, NIJ is making a special effort to committing its resources and expertise to building a new partnership. We encourage your ideas and reactions in the months and years ahead. 

Jeremy Travis, J.D., M.P.A., is director of the National Institute of Justice. NIJ publications mentioned in this article may be obtained from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (1-800-851-3420), as may such related items as NIJ's video on the assessment of California's three-strikes legislation given by Peter Greenwood at one of NIJ's Research-in-Progress Seminars.