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**Research
in Action**

James K. Stewart, Director

August 1988

Wardens and State corrections commissioners offer their views in National Assessment

by Robert C. Grieser

A survey of 44 State commissioners of corrections and 106 wardens once again highlights prison crowding and staff shortages as the biggest problems of the correctional system.

Nearly one-third of the surveyed wardens are operating their facilities at more than 120 percent of capacity. Conversely, only 10 percent are operating at less than 95 percent of capacity. The crowding problem is most acute in the Northeastern and Western States.

With regard to staff shortages, respondents note needs in several areas: mental health; security, counseling, medical, and clerical assistance. Several recruitment and retention problems listed include problems in locating qualified professional staff, obtaining qualified minority applicants, overcoming the poor image of correctional work, combatting staff "burnout," and improving career incentives.

This *Research in Action* provides further details on these results as well as many other findings from the 150 respondents. The survey of commissioners and wardens was conducted

Robert C. Grieser prepared this report from the Institute for Economic and Policy Studies (IEPS). IEPS conducted correctional studies for the 1986 National Assessment Program of the National Institute of Justice. Principal contractor to NIJ for the assessment was the Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., Alexandria, Virginia.

under the National Assessment Program (NAP), aimed at identifying key needs and problems in local and State criminal justice systems. Surveys were sent to all 50 State departments of corrections and to a nationwide sample of 128 wardens of State correctional facilities. Completed surveys were received from 44 commissioners for a response rate of 88 percent and from 106 wardens for a response rate of 83 percent—both rates highest of all the NAP survey returns.

The questionnaires addressed five general areas—background characteristics, criminal justice system problems, prison crowding, operations, and personnel issues.

Background characteristics

The median annual operating budgets (see Exhibit 1) of the commissioners is \$85.3 million. However, the range

across the 44 States is considerable. Twenty-five percent have budgets less than \$40 million, and 25 percent have budgets greater than \$200 million. Almost 70 percent have experienced budget increases over 20 percent during the past 3 years.

Like the budget figures, the number of inmates in State systems varies considerably. The median number of inmates is about 5,000, with 25 percent of the systems having less than 2,000 inmates and 25 percent having more than 11,000 inmates.

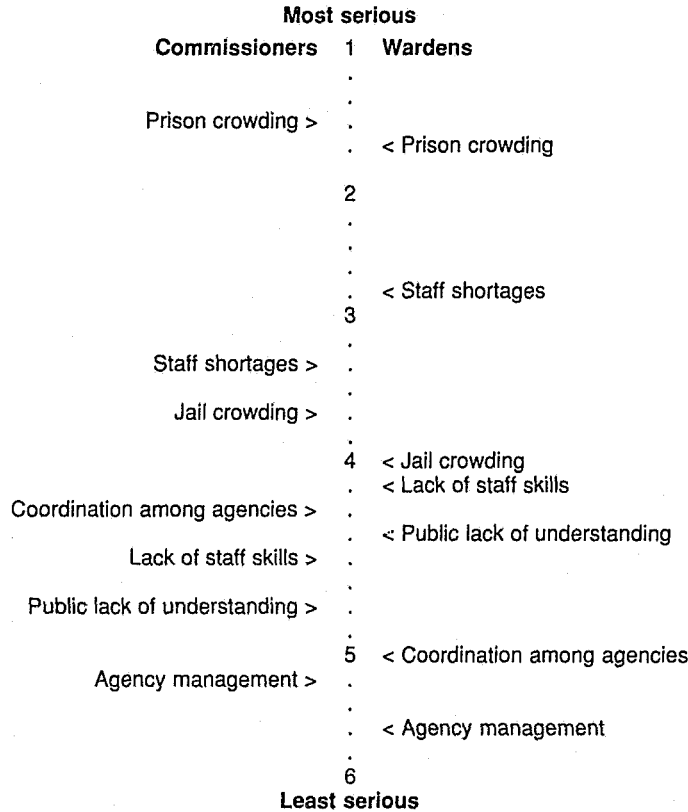
The sample of 106 State facilities consisted of institutions housing medium- and maximum-security inmates. The median number of inmates in these is 1,142. Twenty-five percent have less than 775 inmates and 25 percent have more than 1,900.

Exhibit 1
Selected characteristics of systems and facilities

	State systems facilities	
	Commissioners N = 44	Wardens N = 106
Median 1986 budget	\$85.3 mil	\$14.0 mil
Percent with budget increases of over 20 percent over past 3 years	69	44
Percent rating funds "adequate"	55	56
Median number of personnel	2,264	400
Median number of inmates	4,962	1,142
Median year facility built	na	1941
Median percent of facilities built in last 10 years	27	na

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Exhibit 2
Average rankings of criminal justice system problems



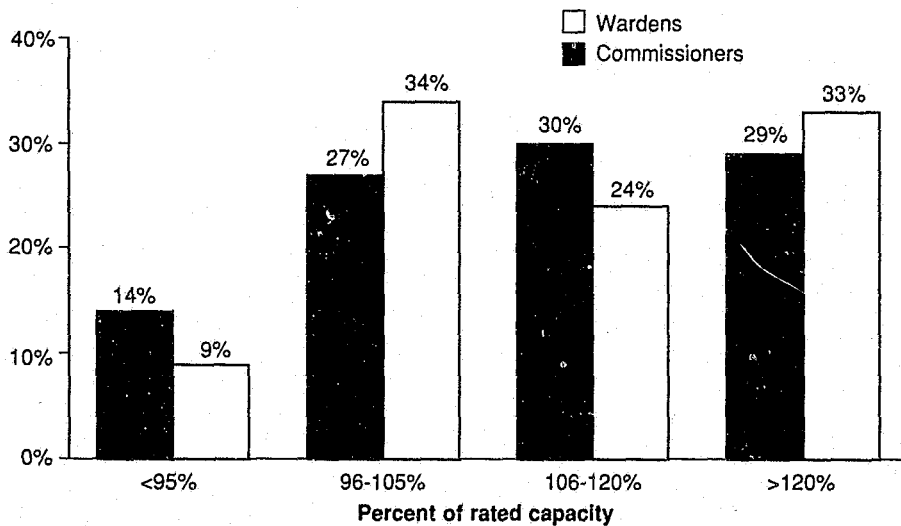
The annual operating budgets average \$14.0 million, and 44 percent of the wardens state that they had budget increases of over 20 percent during the past 3 years. These increases reflect their efforts to keep pace with the growth in inmate populations. However, in response to another question, almost half the wardens state that their budgets are still inadequate.

Criminal justice system problems

The respondents rank-ordered seven criminal justice problems identified in 1983 in the previous national survey.¹ The results (Exhibit 2) show similar rankings by the two groups. Not surprisingly, prison crowding is ranked first by an extremely wide margin, three-quarters of the commissioners and 62 percent of the wardens.

Close to one-third of the commissioners say their systems are operating at more than 120 percent of capacity (Exhibit 3). In contrast, only 14 percent state that their systems operate at less than 95 percent of capacity, a level that provides some flexibility, though limited, to effectively manage a facility.

Exhibit 3
Degree of crowding in State correctional facilities



None of the statewide correctional systems report operating at less than 90 percent capacity, and only two of the 106 facilities report operating at less than 90 percent capacity. The consensus on crowding suggests a critical need for some kind of relief.

In a related question, 58 percent of the wardens report that they are housing two or more inmates in cells designed for single occupancy. The responses parallel the percent of rated capacity at which the facilities operate: those at above rated capacity eventually must double-bunk or worse.

Crowding by region. Two analyses were undertaken to determine where crowding is most acute. State commissioners were divided into four regions:

Northeast, North Central, South, and West.² The most severe crowding exists in the Northeast and the Western States. Southern States are relatively less crowded.

Since the wardens represent a larger sample (N=106), they were divided into seven more narrowly defined regions, including New England (8 wardens), Mid-Atlantic (13), Great Lakes (19), Plains-Mountain (15), Southeast (30), Southwest (10), and Far West (11).³

Once again, crowding in the New England and Far West States is significantly greater than in the South. Facilities in the Plains-Mountain region, however, are also heavily crowded.

The surveys provide some perspectives on reasons for regional differences. For example, the Western region surveys include data from several facilities in California, which is experiencing a severe crowding problem. Southern States house the largest proportion of the Nation's inmates,⁴ but a review of the surveys from these States shows that they have newer facilities indicating that they have attempted to keep pace through construction. Also, some Southern States (e.g., Alabama and Arkansas) have been through court suits, forcing them to take steps to address their crowding problems.

The problem of crowding affects small and large systems alike. Interestingly, crowding is more severe in the smaller systems (less than 2,000 inmates) and the larger systems (more than 12,000 inmates) than in the medium-size systems.

The effects of crowding are also reflected in another part of the National Assessment Program. A survey of 263 jail administrators showed extensive crowding problems in local jails, and over half the administrators

Exhibit 4

Court action by size of State system

Size of system	Type of suit		Number
	Conditions of confinement	Other class-action suits	
<2,000 inmates	58 %	17 %	12
2,000-5,000 inmates	64 %	18 %	11
5,000-12,000 inmates	73 %	64 %	11
>12,000 inmates	60 %	40 %	10
Overall	64 %	35 %	44

said their crowding problems are partly caused by more sentenced State prisoners spending time in their jails pending transfer.

Further, regional data from jail administrators show results similar to those obtained from wardens, with the State-prisoner holding problem greatest in the Mid-Atlantic, New England, Southeast, and Plains-Mountain areas.

Responses to crowding. The commissioners and wardens offered both community-based and facility-based solutions for crowding. Commissioners suggested community solutions such as increasing the number of halfway-house beds, providing intensive parole, and using electronic home supervision. Construction of new prisons and controlling prisoner intake with population caps are also cited.

Solutions mentioned by the wardens are as follows:

- New construction.
- Renovation.
- Intake limits.
- Work release.
- Early release.
- House arrest.
- Program increases.
- More intensive community supervision options.

The diversity of answers reveals no single solution. Rather, the solution appears to be a combination of re-

sponses, including wider community alternatives, increased discretionary authority of corrections officials to manage their populations, and construction of new facilities where appropriate.

Of particular importance, all the solutions require the support of officials outside the corrections realm, including legislators and local government officials. Furthermore, the same policymakers—judges and legislators—responsible for sentencing policies and practices must be involved in defining solutions.

Court orders. Sixty-four percent of the commissioners report their systems are under court order regarding conditions of confinement (Exhibit 4). Thirty-five percent of the State systems are under court order for various other class actions (such as suits involving equal protection and due process issues). The percent of systems with other class action suits is significantly greater in systems with 5,000 to 12,000 inmates.

Forty-six percent of the wardens report that their facilities are under court order regarding conditions of confinement, while 35 percent are under court order for other class actions. As one would expect, facilities under court order for conditions of confinement are likely to be the subject of court intervention for other class-action suits as well.

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Exhibit 5
Visibility of living quarters
(by court status)

	Visibility problem	
	%	N
Facilities under court order	67	45
Facilities not under court order	43	51

Facilities under court order, however, are not necessarily the most crowded. In fact, those facilities that are double-celling are less often involved in conditions-of-confinement litigation than those that are not.

One explanation is that crowding has been eased in those facilities that have been ordered by a court not to exceed a certain population limit because they are prohibited from setting up temporary bed space in dayroom or other program space areas.

Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that current case law indicates crowding is not the sole determinant of unconstitutional conditions. In fact, correctional management, inmate idleness, medical issues, and the incidence of violence are more significant factors in the courts' decisions.

Operations

One section of the survey dealt entirely with operations and procedures. Subjects include facilities design and equipment, specific program needs, classification, and privatization of services.

Facilities design. In response to the questions on facility design, four problems are rated high by either the commissioners or wardens: providing adequate program space, providing for different custody levels, acquiring audiovisual surveillance equipment, and visibility of living quarters from fixed posts.

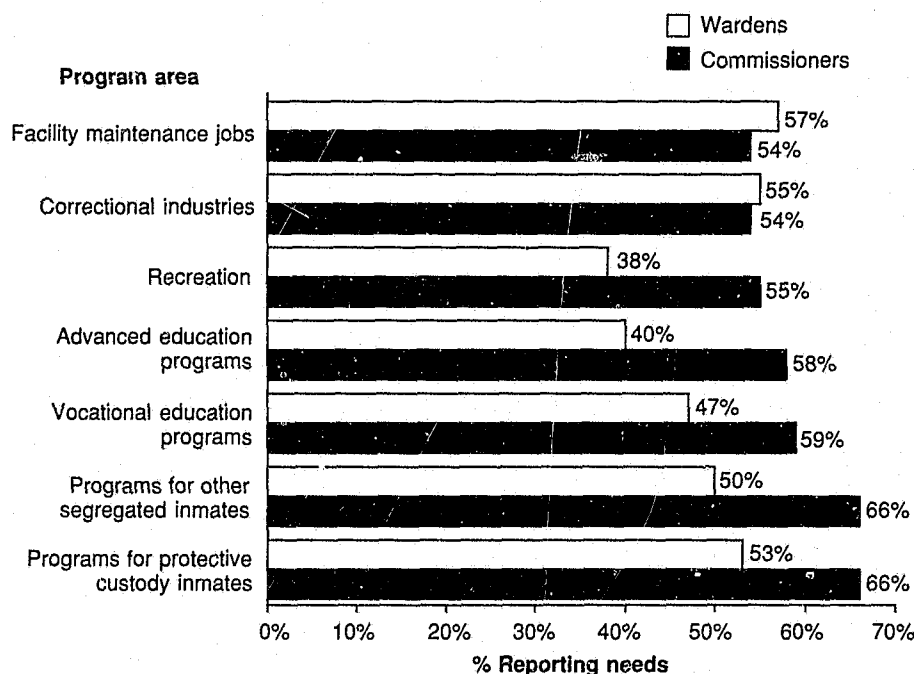
The need for additional program space is by far the most significant, cited by 76 percent of the commissioners and 70 percent of the wardens. An analysis of the responses shows that, once again, the problems are greatest in facilities under court order.

For example, Exhibit 5 shows that the problems of visibility of living quarters is greater in facilities under court order. Wardens perceive that this design problem allows unnoticed incidents of violence—and subsequent court actions—that could be corrected with better audiovisual surveillance.

The most commonly suggested overall solution to design problems is the implementation of the unit management concept. In a few cases, this involves the breakup of one large prison or cell house into separate institutions or management units.

Specific needs. When asked to identify specific program needs, respondents focused on jobs, education, and special inmate needs (Exhibit 6). While the order of priority varies between the commissioners and wardens, the overall results are the same.

Exhibit 6
Most critical program needs



Programs for protective custody and other segregation of inmates are needed most acutely in the systems that are operating in the middle range of crowding (between 96 percent and 120 percent of capacity). A possible explanation is that the more crowded facilities have already been forced to take corrective action while the less crowded systems have not yet encountered serious problems.

The need for industry programs emerges strongly in systems under court order (Exhibit 7). These systems are experiencing a more acute need to combat inmate idleness with programs, reflecting recent court decisions that attribute findings of unconstitutionality to inmate idleness.

Respondents who gave examples of successful programs focused on education, prison industries, and incentives. Specific examples include: "provided video education in the lockup units," "used statewide competency-based programming," "established a vocational prison," "revitalized the prison industries board," "instituted inmate performance pay," and "created a task force on idleness."

Classification. As seen in Exhibit 8, the only classification need indicated by more than half of the respondents is inmate incentive programs. The other classification needs listed in the survey are not considered to be a problem by more than half of the respondents. As to implemented projects to improve classification, responses focused on computerization of classification systems. The commissioners cite projects with increased emphasis on risk assessment, consistency between inmate classification and program assignment, and the development of a prioritized inmate movement system.

Privatization. Private-sector contracts remain limited to those areas that have traditionally been contracted in corrections, including medical, mental health, and prerelease services. Exhibit 9 shows the services most often contracted.

All of the surveyed commissioners contract for some medical services, with 11 percent relying exclusively on contractors for these services. Similarly, 89 percent of the wardens contract some of their medical services, and 14 percent do so exclusively.

Although some medical services are contracted by virtually every system, wardens in the Southwest primarily provide these services in-house. However, the relationship between contracting and facilities under court order may indicate a need to reevaluate this method of providing medical services. In fact, the few remaining

Exhibit 7
Need for industry programs (by court status)

Systems under court order for conditions of confinement:	Need for industry program	
	%	N
Yes	75	28
No	50	16

Exhibit 8
Classification needs

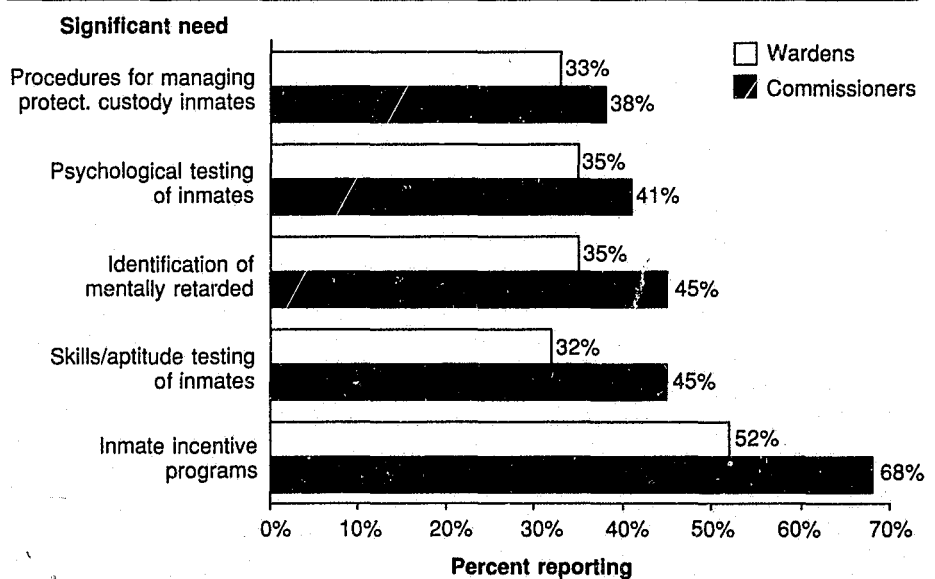
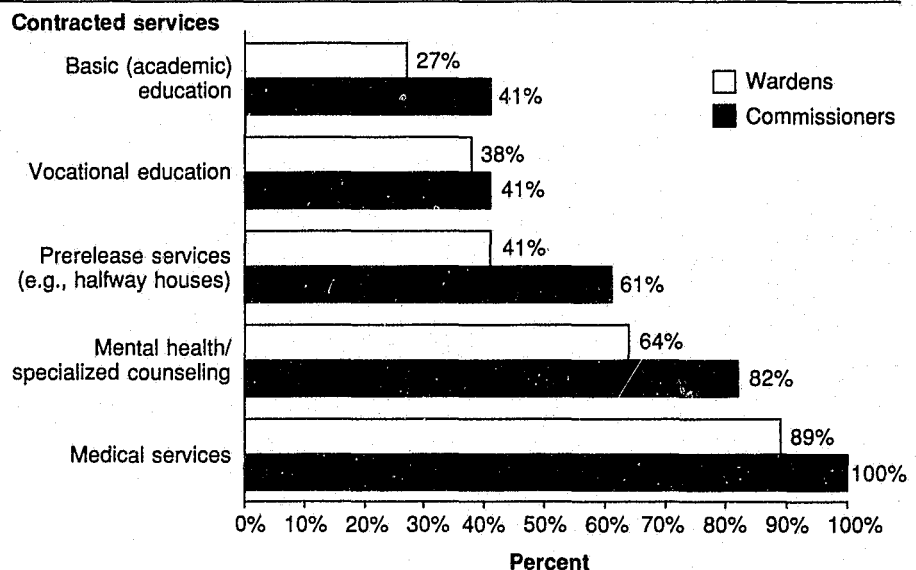
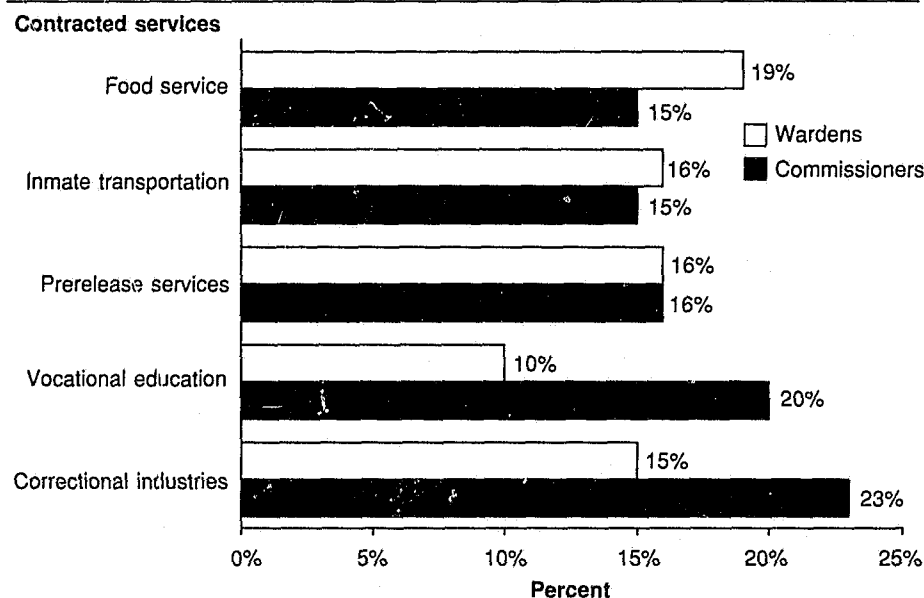


Exhibit 9
Extent of contracted services



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Exhibit 10
Anticipated increase in contracted services in 3 years



facilities providing medical services totally in-house are three times as likely to be under court order.

When asked to indicate their plans for contracting similar services 3 years from now, respondents indicated a slight increase in most areas. The largest anticipated increases in contracting services are shown in Exhibit 10.

These results suggest that the privatization of selected services is expected to continue, but on an incremental basis. Traditionally contracted services, such as medical and mental health, will continue at similar levels, with slight increases in the use of contractors to provide industries, educational, prerelease, transportation, and food services.

Personnel issues

Staff shortages. As seen in Exhibit 2 on the rankings of criminal justice problems, staff shortages rank as the second most serious problem for both groups. Among the commissioners, the most pressing needs are for additional professional staff in areas such as mental health (84 percent of commis-

sioners), medical (65 percent), and counseling staff (57 percent).

On the other hand, wardens gave a different priority of staffing needs with their primary areas being security personnel (63 percent of wardens), mental health (58 percent), and clerical assistance (55 percent).

The need for additional security staff is greater in systems under court order for conditions of confinement—a reflection of their efforts to reduce violence and other incidents related to crowding problems. Clerical staff needs follow a similar pattern, with shortages reported more in those facilities under court order. The volume of paperwork required to respond to court requests for information may account for this result.

Recruitment and retention. The commissioners cite two main recruitment problems: locating qualified professional staff (70 percent) and a shortage of qualified minority applicants (61 percent).

Because of the remote locations of many facilities, recruiting professional

staff is a particular problem for the largest systems (over 12,000 inmates). Low salaries are also noted by almost half the commissioners as a recruitment problem, and this problem is greater in State systems under court order.

The wardens also report that locating qualified professional staff is their most pressing recruitment problem (67 percent). The second most pressing problem cited by wardens is overcoming the poor image of corrections work (58 percent). Interestingly, the wardens in the Southwest report staff hiring freezes as a problem, which is not the case in the rest of the country. The inability to use leave time, most likely a result of the freeze, is also noted by wardens in this region.

Staff “burnout” is the most frequently cited problem in employee retention by both the commissioners (64 percent) and the wardens (50 percent). Other retention problems are the lack of adequate career incentives and low salaries. Inadequate career incentives present a more serious problem for commissioners in systems with less than 2,000 inmates.

Respondents were also asked about programs they had implemented that successfully addressed staffing problems. With regard to recruitment, some of the programs “established a wider recruitment area,” “advertised at university career days and in professional journals,” and related efforts to attract better educated persons. One commissioner also notes the establishment of an annual recruitment drive for women and minorities, and a warden’s comment succinctly summarizes the task of successful recruitment as “selling corrections.”

Implemented projects to address retention problems include: “established pay equity with law enforcement personnel,” “initiated employee assistance programs,” and “made

greater use of the exit interview results." One State has introduced an employee wellness program to minimize unnecessary sick leave.

Training needs. Staff training is clearly a primary personnel need, as indicated by the high percentage of commissioners and wardens expressing the need for training in several areas (Exhibit 11).

While the order of priorities varies slightly between the two groups, the predominant areas are management training, handling special problem inmates, and report writing. As seen in Exhibit 12, the handling of special problem inmates is a greater problem for systems under court order for conditions of confinement.

Summary

One difference of opinion between the commissioners and wardens is the need for training on the handling of prisoners with AIDS. Over half of the commissioners indicate the need for this training compared to only 26 percent of the wardens.

Finally, security training is cited as a training need by 50 percent or less of each group, reflecting widespread availability of this basic training. Security training does emerge, however, as a need in the smaller facilities.

Based on the survey results, there is a consensus between commissioners and wardens on their critical problems. Prison crowding and staff shortages continue to be the two most pressing problems in the State correctional systems. The extent of the crowding problem is reflected in the fact that almost one-third of the commissioners stated that their systems are operating at more than 120 percent capacity and only 14 percent are operating at less than 95 percent of capacity.

Crowding is more severe in the Northeast and Western States than the rest of

Exhibit 11
Training needs of correctional administrators

Training need	Percent of commissioners	Percent of wardens
Management training	75	64
Handling special problem inmates	70	72
Report writing	68	63
Liability issues	66	52
Interpersonal relations	57	65
Handling prisoners with AIDS	53	26
Stress management	52	62
Security	50	46

the country. Solutions to the crowding problems suggested by the commissioners and wardens include increasing the number of halfway house beds, providing intensive parole, using electronic home supervision, and new construction and renovation of facilities.

Some of the staff-need areas include mental health, medical, counseling, security, and clerical assistance. The need for additional security staff in the facilities is greater in systems under court order for conditions of confinement. Clerical staff needs follow a similar pattern, with more acute shortages in those facilities under court order.

The commissioners cite the two main recruitment problems as locating qualified professional staff and a shortage of qualified minority applicants.

Recruiting professional staff is a problem for many large facilities (over 12,000 inmates) that have remote locations. Staff "burnout" is the most frequently cited problem in employee retention by both the commissioners and the wardens. Additional needs include training in several areas, with management training, the handling of special problem inmates, liability training, and stress management noted as especially high priorities.

Exhibit 12
Need for special problem inmate training

	Need special problem inmate training	
	%	N
Systems under court order	82	28
Systems not under court order	50	16

Beyond crowding and staff concerns, the most significant operations problem is the ability to provide adequate space for programs for a burgeoning population. Program needs include education, recreation, industries, and other job opportunities—all effective solutions to reducing inmate idleness.

The capacity to provide programs for increasingly specialized inmate groups, such as segregation and protective custody offenders, emerges as a particular area of concern.

Each of these problems has been the subject of litigation and will likely continue to be in the future. One way in which administrators have attempted to seek assistance in providing specialized programs and services is by contracting with the private sector. As expected, contracting for selected services such as prison industries, food service, inmate

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transportation, and prerelease are anticipated to increase over the next 3 years, although on an incremental basis.

The findings of the NAP survey reflect a correctional system already extended beyond the limits of its capacity. Correctional administrators are in serious need of additional space, programs, and services to keep pace with an increasing population. Additionally, they require more training and programs for dealing with specialized offender needs. Moreover, these needs must be addressed within the context of continued scrutiny by the courts.

Notes

1. The 1983 National Assessment Program survey was conducted for the National

Institute of Justice by Abt Associates, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.

2. Ira Sharansky, *Regionalism in American Politics*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

3. New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont. Mid-Atlantic: District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania. Great Lakes: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin. Plains-Mountain: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming. Southeast: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia. Southwest: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas. Far West: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Washington.

4. *Prisoners in 1985*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, June 1986.

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