

Prisoners

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Mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons

It is the mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prison and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens.

Contents

VOL. 2, NO. 3 ■ SUMMER 1991

3 Connecting Research With Practice

Judy G. Gordon
An overview of the Bureau of Prisons' Office of Research and Evaluation.

5 Successful Prison Leadership

Kevin N. Wright 133420
Leaders can't go it alone in the fast-changing correctional environment of the 1990's.



12 Toward Better Use of Information

Harriet M. Lebowitz 133421
How managers can better integrate correctional research into their decisionmaking process.

19 Challenging Beliefs About Prison Crowding

Gerald G. Gaes 133422
Prison crowding is rarely the sole cause of serious inmate problems, argues the Bureau of Prisons' Chief of Research.



24 An Era of Change

Loren Karacki 133423
Despite rapid population growth, violent and disruptive behavior have generally declined in the Bureau of Prisons over the past decade.

32 Drug Treatment

Susan Wallace, Bernadette Pelissier, Donald Murray, and Daniel McCarthy 133424
The massive influx of substance-abusing inmates has produced a variety of responses on the Federal level.

41 Conditions of Confinement Suits

Scott Styles 133425
How the Bureau of Prisons, unlike many State and local systems, has effectively avoided major judicial interventions.



48 Implementing Key Indicators

Evan Gilman 133426
The Bureau of Prisons' automated information system provides a test case for studying how innovations are implemented in organizations.

57 Who Really Goes to Prison?

Charles H. Logan 133427
A review-discussion of a new study produced by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

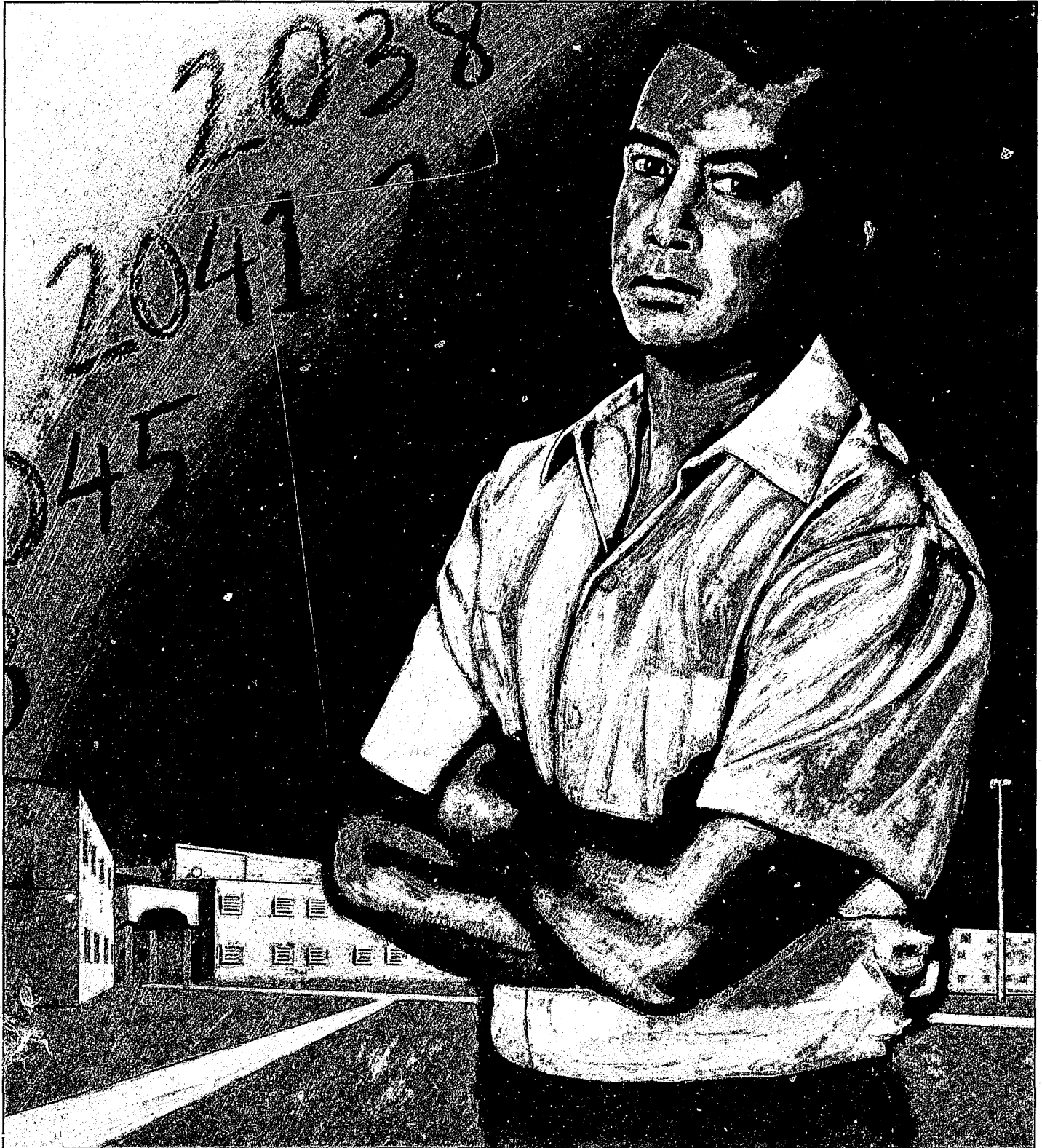
60 Long-Term Inmates

Judy G. Gordon and Susan Wallace 133428
A profile of a rapidly increasing Federal inmate population, one that poses major challenges to all correctional systems.

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Long-Term Inmates

A preliminary look at their programming needs and adjustment patterns

Judy G. Gordon and Susan Wallace

Long-term inmates are a special group within the overall inmate population. While all inmates generally share the same program and service needs, some of the problems common to all inmates are particularly acute for offenders who face long sentences. Concerns about maintaining meaningful family ties, holding on to self-respect, keeping one's mind alert, preparing for release, maintaining one's health, surviving, and staying out of trouble are magnified for the inmate who must spend a significant portion of his or her adult years in an institutionalized environment.

More inmates are facing longer sentences than ever before, due to modifications in sentencing legislation that have reduced good-time allowances, eliminated parole, and required mandatory minimum sentences for specific offenses. Rewarding inmates for their good behavior and self-improvement by reducing their sentence is no longer an option for those sentenced under the new law. As the number of long-term inmates continues to grow, the Bureau of Prisons will need to develop creative new ways to motivate and manage these individuals during their lengthy incarceration.

The Office of Research and Evaluation is currently exploring the concerns and needs of long-term inmates, whom we've tentatively defined as those with expected lengths of stay of 10 years or longer. This definition is based partly on the distribution of expected lengths of stay, and the point at which the numbers drop off markedly.

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Currently, 18 percent of the Bureau's inmates are facing expected lengths of stay of more than a decade. The tables included with article (p. 63) offer some information concerning this subpopulation in November 1989 and November 1990. For example, in November 1990, 45 percent were serving sentences for drug-related offenses (compared to 53 percent of the overall inmate population) and 22 percent for robbery (compared to 13 percent overall). The long-termer's average age was 39, compared to 37 for the overall population. While 23.2 percent of all inmates were in security level 4* or higher institutions at that time, 62.3 percent of the long-termers were in such facilities. Forty-two percent of long-term inmates were black and 19 percent were Hispanic, compared to 33 percent and 25 percent of the entire population, respectively.

*Based on the previous security level classification system, which was revised in 1991.

Recently, several Bureau researchers interviewed a random sample of long-termers at the U.S. Penitentiary, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and the Federal Correctional Institution, Marianna, Florida, to begin gathering inmate views on programs and services available to them, adjustment and coping issues that concern them, and what motivates them. The interviewers were also looking to identify whether there is interest in a prison "career plan" for long-termers. Such a plan would map out a programming strategy, and perhaps an employment plan, for these inmates to follow during their incarceration. Emphasis would be on establishing goals that the inmates wish to achieve during their imprisonment, helping them pass the time more profitably and meaningfully, and preparing them for release. The "career plan" concept is an approach to planning that Professor Timothy Flanagan, School of Criminal Justice, State University of New York/Albany, has suggested as an holistic approach to meeting the needs of the long-term inmate.*

The researchers are refining their survey based on the information collected at Marianna and Lewisburg. They plan to conduct more inmate interviews using the modified survey and to interview staff to define options the Bureau can explore to manage the long-term inmate population.

Research staff interviewed 53 men and 8 women at various stages in their sentences. The men's average age was 40

*See Professor Flanagan's article, "Long-Term Inmates," in the Spring 1991 *Federal Prisons Journal*.

and their average expected length of stay was 18 years. Twenty were serving time for drug offenses, and 17 for robbery. The average woman interviewed was aged 37 and had an expected length of stay of 21 years. Two of the women were serving sentences for drug crimes and three for robbery. Eighteen of those interviewed overall were Hispanic, 25 were black, and 36 were white.

Certain concerns came up consistently in talking with the inmates. One of the most important is the contact they maintain with family and friends through visits, telephone calls, and correspondence. This support system serves as a beneficial and valuable resource for some inmates, who look to these relationships for financial assistance and as a means of maintaining their identity and sense of self "as they were" prior to their incarceration. Other inmates provide money they earn in prison to their families—presumably another way to maintain a sense of self-worth and to be connected to one's family. While maintaining ties with outsiders is surely of concern to all inmates, the position of long-termers is even more compelling; over time it becomes more and more difficult to keep these relationships alive. Friends and family tend to pull away, so that the inmate must now look to other inmates for emotional support, which many are reluctant to do in their effort to stay out of trouble.

It seems worthwhile for the Bureau to consider ways to help inmates and their friends and families maintain their ties over time. Inmates suggested the need for visiting policies that facilitate more "natural" relationships among family—particularly with their children, who have

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difficulty understanding why they cannot, for example, freely hug or touch their parent during the visit. Some found the visiting situation so depressing that they asked family members not to visit. These inmates said they would probably feel differently, however, if contact visiting were permitted and if the visiting room atmosphere was somehow more private and pleasant. Most interviewees expressed an interest in conjugal visiting and said they believed it would go far in reducing violence and homosexual activity in the institution and in relieving stress.

Another problem for long-termers is their desire to avoid a sense of isolation in prison, but simultaneously to stay out of trouble and do their own time. One of the harsh realities of prison life is that prison relationships tend to be superficial. Inmates recognize that penitentiaries, in particular, can be dangerous places and that they cannot rely solely on staff for their protection. Instead, they must

assume responsibility for their own well-being. Typically, this means they attempt to "do their own time" by assuming a positive, day-by-day attitude, maintaining guarded relationships with other inmates, and restricting contact with staff. In this emotional vacuum, inmates tend to crave normal, warm interaction with people. They are interested in individuals who care about other people and take a genuine interest in others without imposing prior conditions. Inmates tend to look to outsiders for this contact which, of course, is complicated by the difficulty in maintaining relationships with family and friends. One way to limit this sense of isolation might be to encourage volunteerism (e.g., visitors from the community, pen pals) and contract with outsiders to teach courses or crafts in the institution.

A number of interviewees expressed an interest in more programs and activities. Inmates value their prison jobs and any program involvement they have for keeping them occupied and providing a sense that their time is being spent productively. Inmates generally felt that the number of vocational training opportunities available to them was limited and that most programs suffered from outdated techniques and equipment. They were concerned about the fact that, with the exception of Lewisburg's dental technician program, once the training is completed, opportunities to use their new skills occur rarely, if ever. Another issue is the timing of such training, given the lack of opportunity to practice what is learned. Some interviewees said they participated in such programs at a relatively early point in their sentence and would probably be unable to

remember enough of what they learned to get work when their release date arrived. In addition, some interviewees with release dates in the 21st century felt certain that even if skills they learned today were up to date, by the time they are released, such training would no longer be applicable.

Specific programs inmates said they would like access to included more comprehensive prerelease training, job training over time that will keep up with technological advances (e.g., computer skills) subsidized college (undergraduate and graduate), programs for people with college degrees, various clubs (sports, writing, poetry), more counseling opportunities, more drug treatment programs, an expanded music program, more arts and crafts, a Vietnam veterans' group, psychological-type programs to help inmates gain insight into themselves, horticulture training with the opportunity afterwards to design and maintain prison landscaping, institutional cook training followed by the opportunity to work on meal planning and preparation, more spiritual programs (meditation, yoga, Ta'i Ch'i), an interracial communications program, AIDS education, health education, auto body repair, auto mechanics, painting, carpentry, masonry, electronics, and asphalt grading.

It should be noted that the inmates who expressed more interest in program opportunities tended not to be those just starting their sentences. Newly arrived long-termers seemed occupied with filing appeals and gaining release and did not seem to have accepted the idea of spending many years in prison. As time passes, it seems that many long-termers come to accept their imprisonment and look for ways to get by.

Profiles of sentenced long-term inmates					
Sample conducted November 30, 1990					
Age			Race		
	number	%		number	%
18 to 24	646	7.1	Asian	68	.7
25 to 34	2,981	32.6	Black	3,801	41.6
35 to 44	3,320	36.4	Indian	182	2.0
45 to 54	1,511	16.5	White	5,082	55.6
55 or more	675	7.4	Total	9,133	100.0
Total	9,133	100.0			
Offense			Marital status		
Drug-related	4,120	45.1	Single	3,219	35.2
Robbery	2,024	22.2	Married	2,801	30.7
Violent crimes	765	8.4	Divorced	1,311	14.4
DC offenses	559	6.1	Common law	695	7.6
Property	313	3.4	Separated	421	4.6
Firearms	270	3.0	Widowed	82	.9
Other	1,082	11.8	Missing data	604	6.6
Sex			Comparison of sentence stages		
Female	338	3.7	1st third	6,351	69.5
Male	8,795	96.3	2nd third	1,796	10.8
Total	9,133	100.0	3rd third	986	19.7
<small>These stages refer to the first, second, and final thirds of an inmate's sentence. For example, an inmate serving the 4th year of an expected 15-year sentence would be considered to be in the first third of his/her sentence.</small>					
Comparison of expected length of stay in BOP and contract facilities					
	November 1989		November 1990		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
0 to 5 years	27,423	64.6	31,584	62.4	
6 to 10 years	10,218	24.0	11,884	23.5	
11 to 15 years	2,554	6.0	3,073	6.1	
15 or more years	2,308	5.4	4,034	8.0	
Total	42,503	100.0	50,575	100.0	

While long-term inmates perceive a need for more voluntary activities and programs, the new sentencing law may result in a decrease in what is sometimes referred to as "gleaning" behavior. "Gleaners" become extensively involved in educational and self-help programs as a means for self-improvement and to impress staff and paroling authorities. Since the new sentence structure eliminates early release by parole and establishes time served on a formula basis, the motivation to glean may be reduced or eliminated for some inmates. The sentencing structure may also increase the number of inmates who lose a sense of hope. Therefore, it seems important to identify rewards and incentives that could help motivate inmates to spend time productively. This desire for incentives was mentioned in connection with the concept of a "career plan"; inmates said they wanted to be rewarded in some way when they achieve certain milestones. Such rewards might include money, additional visiting or phone privileges, awards and certificates, having a television in one's room for a week, and positive verbal reinforcement.

Various long-term inmates expressed a desire to survive in prison and to make it back to the outside. They discussed this survival issue from two angles: to avoid physical danger, and simply to maintain good enough health and to live long enough to reach the end of their sentence. This latter concern appears to become more important as inmates grow older and begin to experience significant health problems. The Bureau may need to emphasize wellness and preventive care

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among the inmate population, particularly for long-termers. Perhaps individualized wellness programs could be developed for interested inmates to help them maintain confidence in their ability to survive.

There are many issues to be explored in terms of what the Bureau can do to better manage its long-term inmate population. Some key questions that need to be asked:

- How can the Bureau help long-term inmates maintain their self-respect and individuality in an institutional environment that requires uniformity and obedience?
- Can separate privileges/amenities/rewards be offered to longer-term inmates?

- What incentives can be offered to new-law long-termers?
- How can long-termers be better prepared for a successful return to society?
- What about foreign nationals and others who don't speak English well enough to become involved in many programs and whose families are too far away to visit and expensive to telephone?
- Is there a way to reduce the conflict between salary-earning opportunities (UNICOR, other jobs) and job training/education programs that yield no money? This problem applies particularly to inmates who have no outside income source or who need to send money to their families.

The Office of Research will delve further into these issues, particularly from a management perspective, to determine whether long-term inmates pose any unique management problems and, if so, what measures will help improve the situation. ■

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