

Developing a Data-Driven

Jail Population Management Plan

DAVE WELLS



This article provides information for developing a robust, data-driven management plan for jail populations. An effective jail population management plan can help agencies better use limited resources (jail-bed space) and also help protect public safety.

Factors That Drive Jail Populations

When developing a jail population management plan, it is first important to understand what factors determine the size of a jail population. Most experts now recognize that policy factors rather than crime rates and local socioeconomic conditions dictate the size and makeup of a jail's population (see Figure 1). Examples of policies that affect jail population include:

- Conservative bail/bonding policies that cause more offenders to be incarcerated pretrial pending adjudication.
- Sentencing policies that favor incarceration for less serious crimes and lengthy sentences when statutes permit lesser sentences.
- Lack of appropriate alternatives to incarceration, such as supervised pretrial release or postsentence alternatives in lieu of all or part of a jail sentence.
- Probation/parole technical violation policies that result in incarceration.
- Prosecutors' charge and plea policies.
- Lack of discretionary good time and work/program credit days.
- Lack of an effective inmate program policy that may allow successfully programmed inmates to serve the balance of their jail terms in the community with continued treatment.
- Legislation affecting sentence lengths and a judge's discretion (i.e., mandatory minimums, California AB 109).

By its nature, policy is changeable and local correctional systems and stakeholders are empowered to implement changes that can affect a jail's population. However, this sometimes requires a shared sense of the problem and, in some cases, the political wherewithal to adopt the change.

Identifying Target Populations

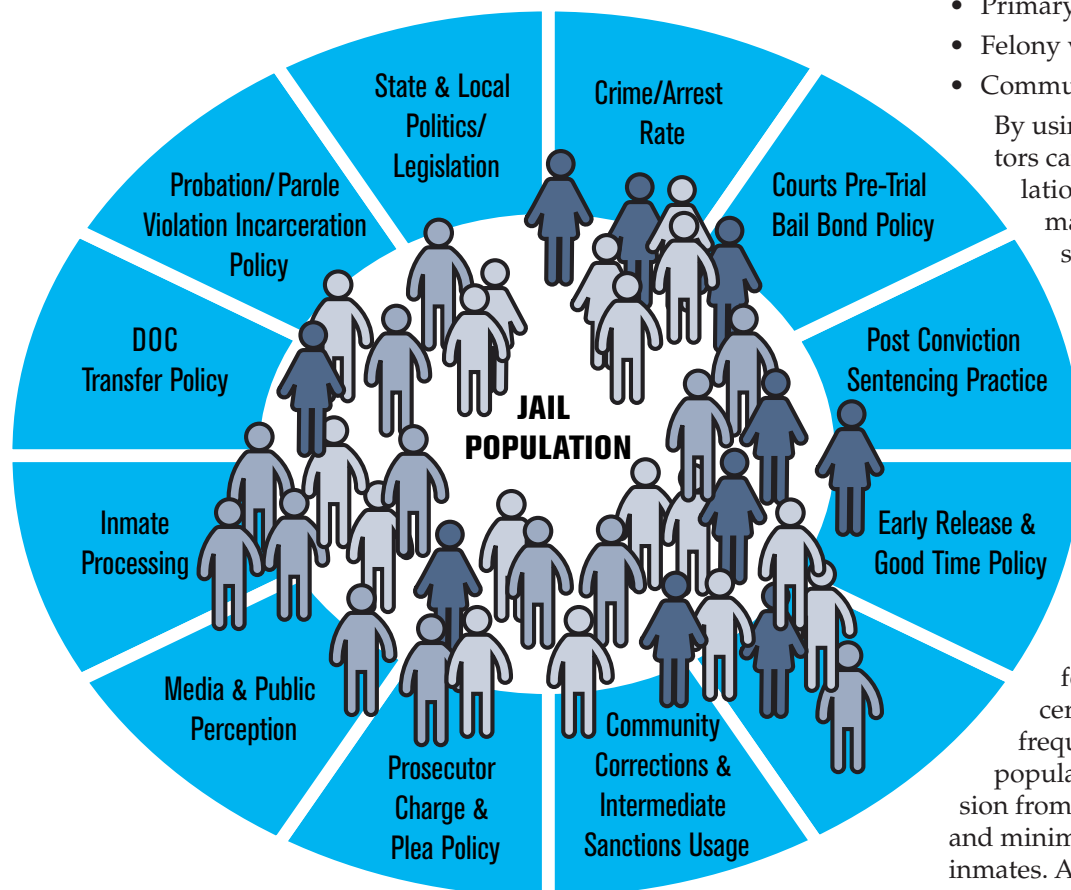
Two measurable factors decide a jail's size and makeup: number of admissions and length of stay. Reducing either or both of these factors through coordinated policy changes can profoundly alter the number and type of inmates in a jail. To establish new policies linking jails and community corrections, policymakers need adequate and reliable data that focus on various jail subpopulations. These include

- Pretrial versus postsentence.
- Security/custody classification levels.
- Length of stay on each status.
- Primary charge.
- Felony versus misdemeanor.
- Community-risk assessment.

By using these data, administrators can break down a jail population to better understand its makeup and identify which subpopulations should be targeted for innovative policy and program options.

Although principally designed to address internal facility management, inmate classification systems also can be designed to identify which subpopulations can be considered for alternatives to incarceration. Two of the most frequently selected inmate populations targeted for diversion from jail are pretrial detainees and minimum-security postsentence inmates. A good inmate classification system plays a critical role

Figure 1. Policies and Practices Impacting Jail Populations.



in identifying and targeting these populations. The nationally recognized “decision tree” classification system taught by the National Institute of Corrections, for example, identifies minimum-security presentence detainees who are nonviolent and also characterized by no prior assault record, no escape history, less than three prior felony convictions, no detainers or warrants, no institutional problems, and likely not prison bound (see <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/014373.pdf>). This target population can be further screened for pretrial release consideration using a validated pretrial risk assessment (failure to appear) tool. Thus, appropriate low-risk inmates can be identified more efficiently and screened for pretrial release consideration as an extension of the jail classification system. This same classification system also identifies minimum-security inmates with the same nonviolent characteristics as those described above but who are sentenced to jail.

Once low-risk, nonviolent inmates are identified and classified, jail administrators can explore programs and alternatives to incarceration in lieu of all or part of their sentences. However, effective screening does not stop there. Although internal inmate classification systems are designed principally to assess internal facility risk to other inmates and staff, they are not designed to assess risk to public safety, reoffending, or absconding. These

eligible target populations (initially identified by the internal classification) need further screening with a validated risk tool to assess their risk to the community. Some inmates who present a minimum risk within an institution may well be a higher risk if given access to their former lifestyle, and thus may not be good early-release candidates without appropriate treatment interventions and supervision to mitigate that risk.

Data-Driven Policy—“What-If” Scenarios

Rather than using data-driven simulations, new policies and programs are often implemented with an anecdotal “hoped for” result which, in fact, may be an unrealistic expectation. New systems analysis tools are now available that allow policymakers to “model” the potential impact of any specific policy change on a jail’s future population. This is very useful for determining the likely impact of a new initiative (policy change) before its implementation.

New applications can now provide “what-if” scenarios for any set of inmate subpopulations by using their admission rates, average daily population (ADP), and average length of stay (ALOS) data. In addition, they can predict the potential impact of any of these subpopulations (i.e., minimum-security pretrial or postsentence inmates) on an institution’s future ADP.

NORTHPOINTE SOFTWARE SUITE

Software and Services to Implement Evidence-Based Practices

Nationally Recognized for Inmate Classification and Risk/Needs Assessment

- COMPAS Core, Women, Reentry, Youth risk/needs assessment for risk management, treatment and case planning
- Validated assessment and case management tools to support pre-trial release
- Case management for community corrections case processing, supervision, non-compliance & rewards guides
- Jail crowding management tools and strategies
- Tools to forecast bed space utilization and program capacity needs
- The Northpointe Suite software now also includes the LSI-R, LSI-R:SV and LSI-CMI

SERVICES:

Consulting
Training
Research



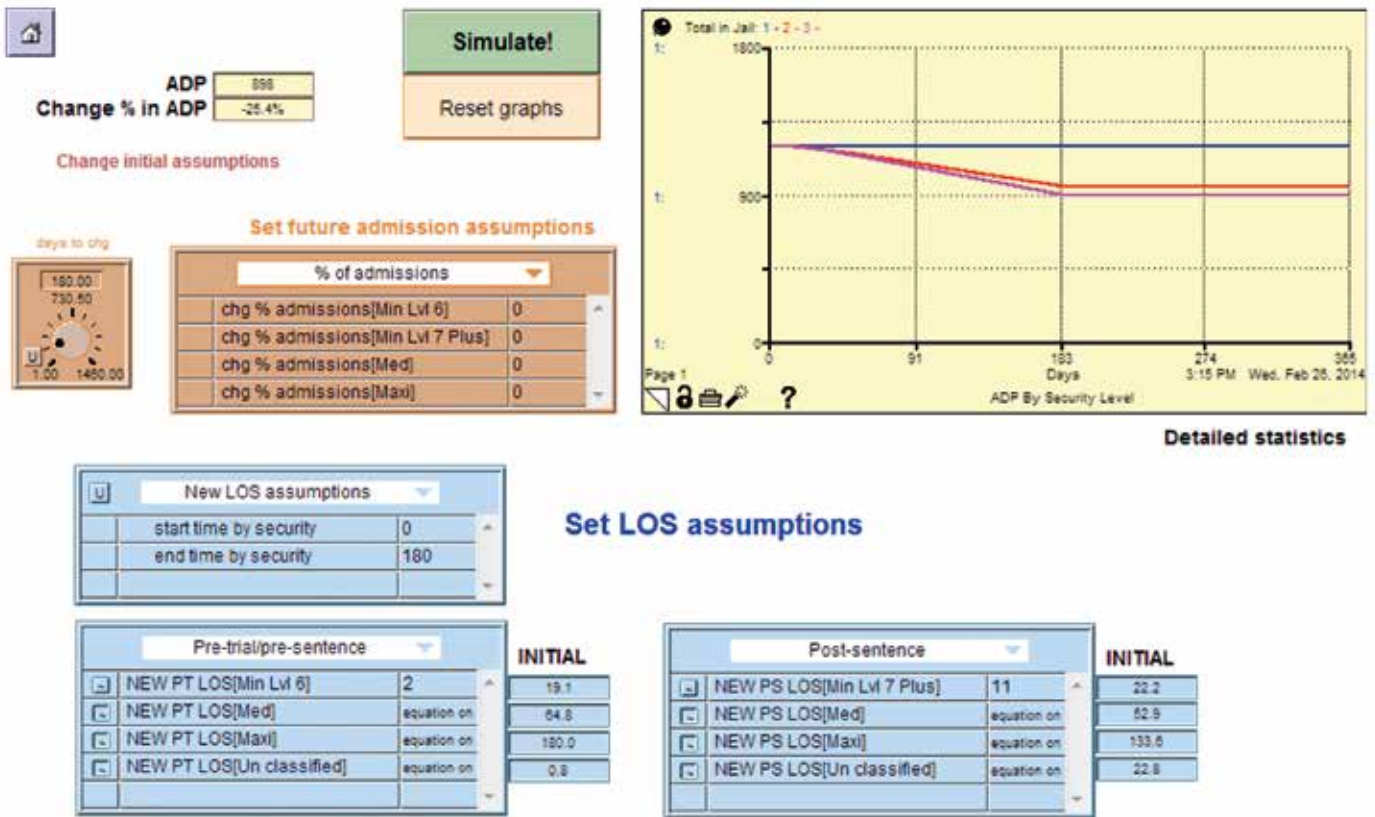
POLICY | PRACTICE | SCIENCE | TECHNOLOGY

1.888.221.4615

info@northpointeinc.com

www.northpointeinc.com

Figure 2. Jail-to-Community Scenario Tool.



Example: “What if” we were to reduce the ALOS of our current minimum-security pretrial population by 90 percent through the implementation of additional risk screening and a supervised pretrial release program? In addition, what if we reduced the ALOS of our sentenced minimum-security—low-to-medium community-risk population by adding alternatives to our incarceration program? Then what would our ADP count be in six months, assuming no other changes?

Modeling this set of scenarios indicates that implementing these policies and practices reduces this jail’s ADP from 1,200 to 890 over a six-month period. Policymakers could then determine whether the potential reduction in ADP is worth the cost of implementing the proposed scenario. Such modeling can also objectively determine future jail-bed needs and, if new construction is being considered, the types of jail beds.

Stakeholder Collaboration

To implement such data-driven decision processes in a jail, criminal justice practitioners, treatment providers, county commissioners, planners, and other key players need to work together. This coordination provides

several potential benefits, including synthesizing policy across agencies, “back flushing” targeted offenders from jail into supervised and accountable community corrections, and reinforcing a coordinated system of behavior incentives for offenders.

Jail classification, coupled with the use of validated assessment tools and jail management information system data, can provide a data-driven analytical strategy that better manages jail populations and uses a jail’s limited resources more effectively. To maximize success, community corrections, courts, and jail officials must coordinate their policies. Such coordination supports the development of a data-driven, integrated system of intermediate sanctions and community corrections to match the various subpopulations of offenders who enter the local criminal justice system. This benefits not only those who work in the criminal justice system, but also the offender and the community. ■

Dave Wells is co-founder and current General Manager of Northpointe, Inc. For more information, visit northpointeinc.com.