

## **DECIDING ON A NEW JAIL DESIGN**

by Allen R. Beck, Ph.D.

### **NEW GENERATION JAIL DESIGN -- A SHIFT AWAY FROM 200 YEARS OF THINKING**

1983 was a milepost that signaled a departure from nearly 200 years of jail design philosophy. In that year the concept of direct supervision was formally recognized by the National Institute of Corrections, NIC. Subsequently, the concept and its design implications were endorsed by the American Jail Association, AJA, the American Correctional Association, ACA, and the Committee on Architecture for Justice of the American Institute of Architects. Even though "new generation" jail concepts have gained wide acceptance among informed professionals, there are many law enforcement, jail, and county officials who have not had the benefit of being in the communication channel on reforms in jail design.

Unfortunately, jail design becomes easily entangled in moral debates which push the issues of staff safety and rights of the confined to the background. As will be pointed out in this article, new generation jails are much safer than old style jails. In addition, decision makers must hold in mind that their jails will house unconvicted as well as convicted persons. About 60% of most jail populations consists of unconvicted defendants, many of whom are held on relatively low bonds and would be out on bail if they had the money.

Making a decision about the design of a new jail may be difficult for county commissioners because of the unfamiliarity of concepts about jail design and inmate supervision. The path to selecting a jail design is filled with the risk of embracing mistakes that will affect liability, safety of staff and inmates, efficiency in daily operations, and effectiveness in functioning. Long after the dollar savings obtained by selecting a less expensive, flawed design have been forgotten, the problems of a bad design will remain as painful and costly reminders of the shortsightedness of county commissioners' decisions. Counties in which this sore memory lingers are not difficult to find.

This article will investigate three strategies for inmate supervision and their impact on jail design. Graphically, jail designs will be displayed, how these designs are employed will be discussed, and various considerations in decision making about selecting designs will be examined.

### **THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF JAIL DESIGN**

Jail design should be based on direct or indirect supervision of inmates.  
Linear design should be absolutely avoided.

As will be explained in this article, this principle acknowledges that one of the basic tenets of new generation jail design is the need for continuous observation of inmates. The Standards of the American Correctional Association, ACA, for example, are very specific in this regard:

*Written policy and procedure should require that all living areas be constructed to facilitate continuous staff observation, excluding electronic surveillance, of cell or detention room fronts and areas such as dayrooms and recreation spaces. Continuous observation of inmate living areas is a fundamental requirement for maintaining safe, secure custody and control. The physical plant should facilitate the performance of this operational function.<sup>1</sup>*

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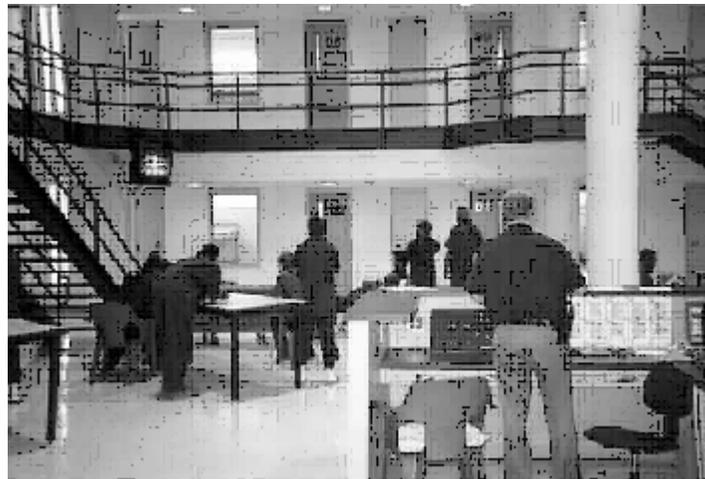
<sup>1</sup> American Correctional Association, *Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities*, 3rd Edition. Lanham, MD. 1991, Standard 3-ALDF-2B-03, p. 32.

The reader should be aware that the ACA is not just a small interest group, but the largest organization of correctional professionals in the United States. Standards of this organization are based on substantial study by special ACA committees. Adherence to ACA standards is one of the best ways to insulate against legal challenges about jail conditions.

### **DIRECT SUPERVISION DESIGN**

Continuous observation is provided in two types of design, direct and indirect supervision. Direct supervision places the correctional officer's station within the inmate living area, or "pod" as it is often called. By placing the officer in the pod he or she has immediate visual observation of inmates and unrestrained ability to receive information from and speak to inmates. During the day, inmates stay in the open area (dayroom) and are not usually permitted to go into their rooms except with permission and must quickly return. The officer controls door locks to cells from the control panel. Functions of this panel can be switched to a panel at a remote location, usually known as "central control," when the officer leaves the station for an extended time. The officer also is wearing a small radio on his shirt-front that permits immediate communication with the jail's central control center if the need should arise. In addition, the dayroom area is covered by a video camera that is also monitored in the central control room.

Exhibit 1. Direct Supervision in a Medium Custody Housing Unit



By placing the officer in the pod, there is an increased awareness of the behaviors and needs of the inmates. This results in creating a safer environment for both staff and inmates. Since interaction between inmates is constantly and closely monitored, dissension can be quickly detected before it escalates. Inmates who show signs of becoming unruly also can be quickly identified and removed to a more secure living unit/pod. In addition, maintenance costs are lower in direct supervision pods because the close supervision reduces misuse and harm to equipment, furnishings, and walls. This style of inmate supervision performed by well-trained officers creates a more positive environment than other types of supervision methods. The stress on officers and inmates alike is greatly reduced. From a liability standpoint, the jail and county's liability will be reduced as a result of less litigation arising from unobserved behavior, e.g., suicide, fights, sexual assaults, accidents, and unexpected medical emergencies.

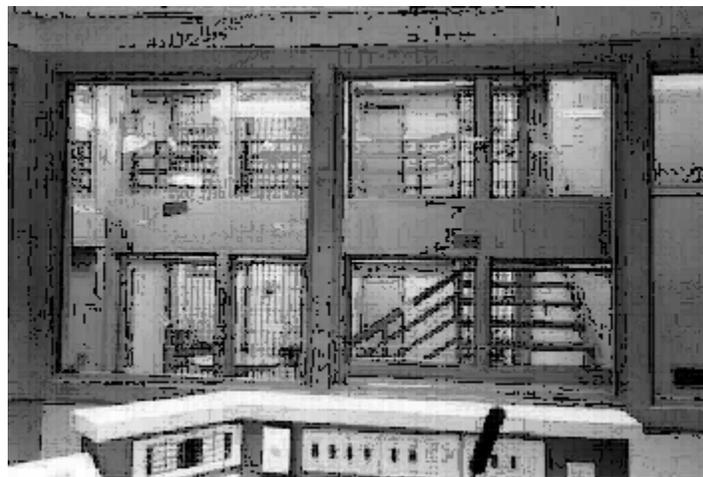
In summary, direct supervision involves three important aspects. First, the inmates are aware that they are being constantly supervised. Second, they are aware that if they create problems they will be quickly removed to a higher custody pod having fewer privileges, such as ability to come out of their cells. Third, they are aware that the officer is backed up by a personal radio alarm system and video monitoring.

Direct supervision design is most relevant to the housing of medium and minimum supervision inmates. These are inmates who are not considered to be violent or disruptive in the jail environment. This design is not usually employed for the supervision of maximum custody inmates.

### **INDIRECT SUPERVISION DESIGN**

Indirect supervision, sometimes called "remote surveillance," also provides continuous observation of inmates. The layout of the inmate living area is similar to that of direct supervision. The design is "indirect" in that the officer's station is separated from the inmate living area. The officer's station is inside a secure room. Observation is enabled through protective windows in front of the console/desk. A microphone, long black tube, is visible in front of the right portion of the console. Microphones and speakers inside the living unit permit the officer to hear and communicate with inmates.

Exhibit 2. Indirect Supervision Housing Unit



An indirect supervision pod, when used for medium and minimum custody inmates, is similar in design and size to direct supervision pods. However, indirect supervision in a maximum supervision pod usually involves a smaller housing area. In a maximum pod, inmates are not permitted to congregate in an open dayroom, but must spend most of their time in their cells and are let out individually to exercise. For this reason maximum cells are usually larger and require more durable hardware, doors, and fixtures.

Sometimes the indirect design is arranged so that an officer can observe and control two or more adjacent pods. The adjacent pods are configured so that the officer can see into them but the inmates have no visual or auditory access between pods.

In indirect supervision, as in direct supervision, the officer does not leave his/her post and has an uninterrupted view of inmates at all times. As might be expected, the indirect design does not foster the same immediate capability of controlling inmates that is achieved through direct supervision.

### **LINEAR DESIGN**

Linear design, also known as "intermittent surveillance design," does not provide continuous observation. The design is similar in concept to that of a hospital in which long rows of rooms are placed along a corridor. A common variation is to situate housing units, instead of individual cells, along the corridor.

The jail officer must patrol the hall and look through windows to observe each housing unit. A set of narrow observation windows for one of the housing units has been labeled with a "1" in Exhibit 3 and the entry door, also containing a window, is marked with a "2." While walking the corridor the officer may look into a unit or enter as part of

the surveillance. Sounds from within the units are muffled by the closed doors and are not readily heard in the hallway.

The jail officer must patrol the hall and look through windows to observe each housing unit. While walking the corridor the officer may look into a unit or enter as part of the surveillance. Sounds from within the units are muffled by the closed doors and are not readily heard in the hallway.

This design introduces an element of high risk into the management of inmates because interpersonal problems between inmates is most likely to occur when staff are not present. Thus, inmate problems cannot be detected early and prevented from escalating. Video surveillance cannot make up for the problems arising from this type of design. Due to the intermittent nature of staff supervision, inmates are essentially in control of the living area. Studies show that the linear design is associated with an increased frequency of contraband, coercion of inmates by other inmates, assault, rape, suicide, and even homicide.<sup>2</sup>

Exhibit 3. Linear Positioning of Housing Units



A drawback of this design is that, in practice, the jail officer may not patrol constantly, perhaps only every 20 to 30 minutes and sometimes longer. As a result, officers may become involved in other activities such as escorting inmates, supervising cleanup in another area of the jail, and assisting in booking. Such involvement turns their attention from supervision of inmates and extends the times between surveillance patrols of cell areas.

Electronic surveillance has been used to attempt to compensate for the weakness of the linear design. Experience with video surveillance cameras indicates that the officers monitoring banks of video screens are often unable to maintain effective constant watchfulness due to fatigue, preoccupation with other activities, and too many cameras to view. Furthermore, the effectiveness of video surveillance is compromised when inmates determine what is and is not being monitored. When this happens, trouble makers move their illicit activities to off-camera areas. The use of video surveillance in lieu of the presence of jail officers is commonly associated with efforts of decision makers to drastically reduce staffing costs. Such efforts often contribute to serious security problems because when problems arise, as they more often do in this type of jail, there may be an insufficient number of officers available to effectively respond.

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<sup>2</sup> A critique of linear design is found in the Small Jail Design Guide, Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice, March 1988, pp. 3-37 to 3-42.

Well-informed jail administrators avoid the linear design. Architects who advocate the linear design claim that it is less expensive to build and staff than direct or indirect designs. However, the same argument could be used for other problematic designs, such as tents.

### **HOW THE DESIGN OF HOUSING UNITS IS PROPERLY USED**

The cornerstone of effective jail security lies in the classification of inmates according to their supervision needs. The most obvious classification-driven housing assignment is that of separating inmates according to gender. Similarly, hostile inmates should be separated from non-hostile inmates. The identification of who will be difficult to control is achieved through a system of jail classification that includes ongoing observation and reevaluation.

Under such a system, classification screening begins when an inmate enters the jail. After the initial classification decision is made using an objective, i.e., written and validated, assessment instrument, the inmate is constantly observed so that staff can quickly remove him/her to a different, usually more restrictive, pod if disruptive behaviors are exhibited. In this manner, housing units (living areas) of a jail designed as minimum, medium, and maximum supervision can be filled with appropriately matched inmates. Without this system, the supervision of inmates will be marked by inconsistent and poorly justified inmate management practices.

### **THE INTERPLAY OF INMATE BEHAVIOR AND SUPERVISION STYLE**

Within the inmate population will be persons having varying levels of social maturity and, thereby, differing abilities to control their behavior. Immaturity of social behavior has parallels in both adults and children. For example, placing ten small children in a room in which there is no parent or other adult, will usually result in the outbreak of problems. Even sporadic monitoring by an adult who occasionally opens the door is not as effective as a constant presence. This does not mean that all children are bad, but that the dynamics of interaction can be influenced by the whims and antisocial behavior of one or two persons. Similarly, groups of inmates often contain one or more socially immature individuals, who because of their physical size or manipulative capabilities, will contribute to dissension within the group if there is not a supervising staff member present. The presence of a jail officer combined with the ability to remove inmates to other housing areas, is much more effective in controlling fights and assaults on correctional officers than sporadic monitoring. Thus, direct supervision in combination with classification provides a safer environment for both staff and inmates. A safer jail is not only beneficial in light of reduced legal liability but contributes to a better work environment and lower staff absenteeism.

Indirect supervision does not afford the same level of control over inmate behavior as direct supervision. The correctional officer loses much of the immediate sensitivity about communication within the inmate group by being separated in a control room. Such separation, of course, is appropriate in the design of maximum custody housing units. To compensate for separation of the correctional officer, a "rover" should be used. A rover moves in and out of several housing units in order to temporarily make personal contact with the inmates. This arrangement improves the performance of indirect supervision, but is still not equivalent to direct supervision in inmate management effectiveness.

### **WHICH TO CHOOSE?**

Making the choice between direct and indirect supervision should be based upon several considerations which are described on the next page. Of course, selecting a linear design is not an option considered by the astute decision maker.

**Consideration One: Staff Preference** -- For several reasons, staff preference should not be the deciding factor in selecting a jail design. First, experience has shown that administrators and staff who have worked only in old style linear jails, are usually unfamiliar with other designs and are unaware of how to supervise inmates in new generation jails. Generally, biases against direct and indirect supervision are based on minimal knowledge. Jail administrators who have been exposed to well-run direct and indirect supervision jails or have been through training/familiarization with those types of facilities will relinquish preference for linear design. Second, the experience of working in a linear design jail often

results in the development of a "negative correctional culture" that is marked by self-created fictions about how inmates should be treated and managed. Since fights among inmates and verbal and physical assaults on officers are more frequent in linear design jails, jail staff tend to develop a negative, fearful, and more punitive attitude about inmate management. In turn, this negative attitude is often expressed in ways that reinforce hostility among the inmates. Thus, ineffective behavior management often creates some of its own problems. Among trainers of jail staff, this phenomena has come to be recognized as the negative culture of linear jails. This culture, once established, is difficult to change, even when a new direct or indirect supervision jail is constructed. Not only will training be required to alter this culture, but staff changes may also be required.

**Consideration Two: Size** -- Size of the jail will affect the relevancy of direct and indirect designs. As the size of a jail's capacity moves beyond 180 to 200 inmates the applicability of indirect design diminishes. In a small jail, indirect supervision pods are often designed to house 8 to 16 inmates. In larger jails it is more practical to expand the capacity of pods to house about 40 to 50 inmates than it is to build more of the small pods. From an architectural standpoint, small pods are more readily configured around an enclosed observation station than are large pods. Also, from an inmate management standpoint, small groups are easier to control from an external officer's station than larger groups. As a rule of thumb, as the size of a jail's capacity increases, the relevancy of direct supervision design increases. For this reason, direct supervision pods generally range from 24 to 50 beds.

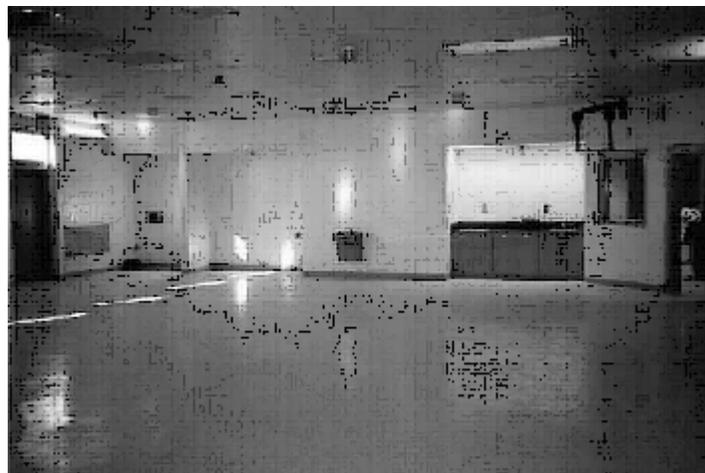
**Consideration Three: Cost** -- Given the ability of indirect supervision to manage several small living units, it is not generally considered to be cost-effective to use direct supervision in small jails. However, the cost advantage diminishes as jail size increases.

### **DORMITORIES**

A dormitory is different from the designs described previously. New jails will usually have fewer dormitories than medium and maximum pods. Cost-wise, dormitories are much less expensive to build. However, their applicability is limited to the housing of minimum custody inmates, such as trusties and persons on work release.

The term, "dormitory," usually implies a different style of housing than a pod. As might be expected a dormitory is a large room into which a number of single or bunk beds are placed. However, instances can be found in which the term, "dormitory," is applied to rooms in a podular-design housing unit that have been configured to accommodate four to eight beds. Exhibit 4 shows a new, unfinished dormitory that will contain 24 beds.

Exhibit 4. A Large Dormitory Before Being Finished



Management of inmates in a dormitory can be accomplished by either direct or indirect supervision. In the dormitory shown in Exhibit 4, the layout is a modified direct-indirect supervision design. Two dorms are situated across a hallway from each other. Observation into the dorms is through a window shown at the right rear of the picture. Next to the window is a doorway. An open officer's station (not enclosed as in an indirect supervision pod) is placed so that an officer can view both dorms and have immediate access through the doorways. In this particular layout the officer's station is located at the end of the hall so that no one will be approaching from the back of the station. This design is feasible because the lower custody level of inmates reduces the need to place an officer in the living area or to enclose the external observation station.

In a small jail, a small dormitory could be arranged around an indirect supervision station along with one or more medium and maximum custody pods. Although many old style jails use intermittent surveillance for dormitories, the same concerns about adequacy of supervision, previously discussed, would apply.

### **BE GUIDED BY BEST PRACTICES**

The design should abide by ACA's Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities.<sup>3</sup> These standards provide important guides for both minimum design features and operational practices in jails. Such standards are particularly important because a local detention facility must provide for the custody and care of persons accused but not convicted of a crime, as well as those who are sentenced. The standards are respected not only by correctional professionals but by the courts as well. The easy to read format of the standards will help county decision makers, as well as jail administrators, understand what should be included in a jail design, such as:

- Occupancy and space requirements for inmate sleeping areas
- Space requirements for dayrooms
- Furnishings
- Special management housing
- Housing for the handicapped
- Light levels (natural and artificial)
- Noise levels
- Indoor air quality
- Law library
- Food service

The committee should request that the architect(s) explain how the proposed design concepts will respond to ACA standards. By making a simple checklist of the standards, county decision makers can intelligently pursue this investigation.<sup>4 5</sup> Such steps are merited because, most likely, the county will be party to a suit in instances of legal problems fostered by poor design.

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<sup>3</sup> American Correctional Association, *Standards for Adult Local Detention Facilities*. 3rd Edition. Lanham, MD. 1991. Updates of the 3rd Edition are contained in the *Standards Supplements* for 1994 and 1998 which are companion publications. To obtain these publications call ACA at (800) 222-5646, ask for the Publications Department.

<sup>4</sup> For detention facilities of 50 beds or less, ACA's *Standards for Small Jail Facilities* should be used.

<sup>5</sup> Some counties have opted to hire a special project manager to ensure their concerns about ACA and other design standards are followed.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. Allen Beck has consulted in planning of jails, training of jail staff in new and old jails, and performing staffing analysis of correctional facilities. His operational appreciation of new generation jails has been heightened as a result of conducting staffing analyses in direct, indirect, and indirect design jails and prisons. These analyses have examined such aspects as the number of inmate security violations associated with various types of facility design problems, e.g., poor lines of sight and congested inmate housing and program areas.

Dr. Beck has a doctorate in Criminal Justice and has been a full-time criminal justice consultant since 1983. He is a principal in Justice Concepts Inc., JCI, which provides consulting services nationwide in the study of criminal justice systems and planning and financing of jails. Dr. Beck can be contacted at Justice Concepts Inc., 417 W. 87<sup>th</sup> Place, Kansas City, MO 64114, Phone: (816) 361-1711, Email: [abeck@justiceconcepts.com](mailto:abeck@justiceconcepts.com).

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