Making Use of Correctional Data for Facility Planning

By Meg Bower

When I was little, my father would take us to his office at the U.S. Geological Survey, where he proudly showed us their computer, which at that time was a room-sized box of gently thrumming metal. My father said it allowed for data storage and analyses my father couldn’t even fathom. I think it was close to that time that the axiom “garbage in, garbage out” was coined, and the modern age of data analysis followed soon after. Throughout the years, the methods in which data is collected and stored has changed, but the importance has remained prevalent.

When dealing with a correctional facility, data is especially significant to those planning the facility. The goal of most correctional planning studies is to understand how a correctional system is working, to better define and analyze problems and to identify solutions. Findings are usually communicated out in a written report format.

At the outset of any correctional system study, a correctional planner will ask for a lot of data. To a planner, the data is a time capsule showing the past and present. Planners base their assumptions about the future on the story the data tells. Most importantly, they will use the data to explain issues and needs to those working outside the system, often to receive support and/or funding. As such, the data recorded over time is critically important to the ability to communicate out on behalf of the client agency, to help it achieve its goals.

Despite the fundamental importance of data to planning, data in corrections is not something most folks think about on a daily basis. It is something that is created passively over long periods of non-planning time as a byproduct of a daily process, which is critical to the mission of safely managing inmates in a correctional setting. Recordkeeping only becomes a matter of independent consideration when someone begins to analyze it to draw conclusions.

Because the quality of data can have a ripple effect for years into the future, it is worthwhile to take a proactive approach to data collection and storage processes in order to improve the quality of future analyses.

Collecting Solid Data

Data is only as useful as what it is able to illustrate. Solid data means consistent, regular data, collected in the same manner over a prolonged period of time, which is detailed enough for flexible analyses to be conducted that explain clearly what has transpired and that suggest compellingly what is likely to occur moving forward. Faulty data is data that is so widely varied that the analyst is left wondering whether what is being observed is a system fluctuation or a variation in data collection methodology, perhaps even a nuance from one individual employee having their own way of doing things.

The process of creating good data results from two things:
- Collecting useful data items
- Collecting and storing the data in a consistent, predictable manner

For correctional facilities, there are several important data items and varied methods in which each should be collected and stored.

Inmate Number or Unique Identifier

Every database requires one item that is unique to each and every data item, which will be used to identify the data set of information as associated to one another. This identifier can be one item (such as a Social Security number or employee ID number at work) or a compound item (such as a last name and birth date at a doctor’s office).

In a correctional system, this identifier is often the same as the inmate number. The best systems are those in which the same inmate number is used throughout the entire criminal justice system, and is linked forever to that individual. The state of Iowa uses a system that employs consistent numbers throughout the criminal justice system, allowing records from court, probation, pre-trial services, corrections and parole to share and populate a rich data base on each individual.

Where cross-agency collaboration does not facilitate this kind of identification, it is important to know whether an inmate number is assigned to the inmate (and will never change across time) or whether the number is assigned per inmate (if this inmate is re-admitted, he or she will receive a new number for this particular admissions and stay). The more consistent the identifier, the better the ability to correlate various distinct characteristics of that inmate with one another.

Admission Date & Recording Process

The admissions, intake and classification process in a correctional system can take anywhere from a few hours (in a jail setting) to 90 days or more (in a prison system). The official admissions date can be recorded at any point in time along the intake process, and that point often varies from system to system. For a planner, it is important to understand when intake (admission) is recorded and how changeable that data is in the database. Are various dates recorded relative to this process (i.e. arrival date at intake, point at which they are dressed in, data classified, date moved to general population)? Are there different intake dates recorded when there is a change in status (i.e. pre-trial to sentenced)? If the same inmate is released and then re-admitted in five years, will the current intake date be overwritten, or is a new record created? Are intake dates and details maintained in a central inmate management system, or are they based on separate recordkeeping by intake and classification staff? Does the system override or update this date as subsequent intake steps occur?

Understanding the manner in which admissions are determined and recorded will help identify how the data can be matched with other inmate characteristics in the inmate management system, and what discrepancies may exist between individual data aggregated to create annual totals and official annual totals.

Inmate Count

The inmate count is perhaps the oldest and most consistently useful data item gathered in any correctional facility. The count is the number of inmates in the facility’s custody at a given time on a given day. Most facilities recognize the benefit of having a morning and evening count. To calculate the count, inmates are locked down at a standard location (typically in the housing units) at a given time, and an official report is made of how many inmates are present, by location. This count typically includes a wealth of detailed information — it may identify inmates by inmate number, housing unit, cell, and/or building (if relevant). It may also include custody classification, gender or other housing-related qualities. Facility managers use this report on a daily basis to manage the placement and movement of the population.

Daily count reports may be completed hard copy on paper forms carried through the unit by correctional officers or transmitted by radio to administration where numbers are recorded. Daily counts can contain a rich amount of detail, particularly if they are able to identify specific inmates and their unique blend of characteristics (gender, age, offense type, treatment, status, time to release, medication and so forth). This level of data can help the planner to quantitate changes in the blend of inmates in a facility over time and to identify new emerging groups who may require dedicated housing; however, the details of daily reports will only be passed on if it is entered into an electronic database format.

Daily count records are usually totaled in monthly summaries that focus on numbers, rather than individuals. These summaries may include some broad breakdowns, such as number of inmates by status (pre-trial versus sentenced, in a jail) or special needs (single-cell housing or handicapped accessible cell, for example) or the number of approved trustees — details useful for population management purposes. What is lost in the aggregation of the numbers into summary reports is the ability to cross-tabulate population characteristics with other characteristics: for example, those trustees who are also on medication or those sentenced males who require a single cell due to behavior and also because they are handicapped. These details can be useful in a planning effort when it comes to matching inmates with housing to determine bed space shortfall and to identify which inmates those beds should be designed to house.

Ideal Inmate Data, Collection & Storage

The ideal database resides inside one inmate management system, which records relevant inmate-specific details on a daily basis along with the daily counts, which stores those details in a database and which also rolls up data into monthly and annual totals. This system should be able to give not only total population over a monthly or yearly period, but also break down population by housing unit, building or other grouping as needed for analytical purposes. The data should identify each inmate in a unique manner that will allow cross-referencing in details on status, age, gender, treatment needs or other features that may illustrate the evolution of certain unique groups within the system. A database of this kind can serve daily administrative purposes, but also serves as a repository of historical data that can later be analyzed over time, to identify trends and changes.

All data should be collected at the same time, so that it can easily be matched to the inmate identifier and point in time at which it was collected. The data collection should be through a regular process, designed to limit variation due to the individual collecting or reporting the information. Intake, daily count and specific junctures in time (such as the last day of each month) can be established as dates on which inmate data will be recorded. Standardizing data collection may involve formalizing the recordkeeping aspects of daily counts or updating the data storage system for inmate information. These are valuable investments.

Regardless of the method, the information gathered should include, at a minimum, the following details for each inmate on that day:
- Inmate number (or other unique identifier for the data)
• Gender
• Admission date (using a consistent methodology)
• Birth date
• Sentence length as per the court sentencing documents (if sentenced)
• Release date (if sentence has ended)
• Offense type (at a minimum, felony – property, felony – personal, misdemeanor; more detail is required for a jail study than for a prison system study)
• Treatment needs — medical, mental health, offense related (sex offender) and other similar treatment that may affect housing assignment
• Custody classification (if possible, get history of classifications; if not, get current classification at the time of the data pull)

Data Storage

The data should be stored in a relational database (a database that allows the data to be grouped and sorted in a variety of ways but retains linkages back to the original inmate associated with each record in the database) or in a software system, which allows easy data exports in database format, rather than as a report.

This relatively basic level of inmate data, stored over time and made accessible to analysis through the ability to export, can offer a treasure-trove of information about the historical population, which can be used to identify changes in system demands over time and to project future demands moving forward.

Annual internal data audits can help with recordkeeping (recording processes used to collect data, original data sources and data quality. Whether this is the year for a major planning effort or not, the efforts made to ensure your database contains the right items, collected consistently and stored to permit maximum analysis will pay off when the time does come to do long-term planning.

Meg Bower is a national criminal justice facility planner with 18 years of experience working with jails, courts and prison systems. She currently works at Dewberry where she identifies space-related problems and crafts solutions, both physical and operational, in correctional facilities. She strives to incubate new ideas in order to create spaces that can bring out the best in those who live and work within them, and to nurture opportunities for human change.

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This forces a new approach and fresh outlook to a problem that is hindering project completion. Simply put, if team members are too busy arguing about conflict, the project isn’t getting done.

An interesting and beneficial byproduct of a formal dispute procedure is the fact that employees don’t necessarily want to follow formal rules with each instance of conflict. Instead, team members learn to problem solve and troubleshoot issues on their own, negating the need for situations to be elevated to the dispute process. Team members realize that these stringent rules bog down the project and are not an efficient use of their own time.

This certainly isn’t a comprehensive guide to contractor partnering, but it’s a starting point. Partnerships can be supremely beneficial to all involved so long as the proper precautions are taken.

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