

Direct versus Indirect Supervision in Correctional Institutions

Correctional facilities that employ direct supervision methods experience more frequent, and less hostile, staff-inmate interaction, according to a recent comparison of direct and indirect supervision institutions in the United States. In addition, direct supervision facilities were more likely to have correctional environments that were "softer" and more "normalized."

"Indirect" supervision is defined as the method of supervising inmates whereby correctional officers monitor inmate living areas from enclosed posts. "Direct" supervision places correctional officers right in the living unit where they are required to have continuous, direct personal interaction with inmates. For the past several years, these two methods of supervision have been the subject of debate within the corrections community. Some say that direct supervision results in lower stress, less violence and less vandalism in the institution as well as improved staff morale and greater job satisfaction.

Others, however, hold that indirect supervision facilities are safer for staff members, who are separated from inmates by a physical barrier.

Jay Farbstein & Associates, Inc., with Richard Wener, attempted to quantify the differences between direct and indirect supervision and to find empirical support for the purported benefits of each approach. Finding support for one supervision approach over another would have implications for the design of new and existing correctional facilities. Design of Indirect Supervision Facilities The most popular layout for indirect supervision facilities is that of a central, enclosed control-booth, from which officers overlook a dayroom surrounded by single cells (the modular or "popular" plan) or by multiple-occupancy cells or dorms. "Pods" usually consist of 48 to 60 beds divided into four or five subunits. Durable, vandal-resistant building systems, fixtures and finishes are commonly used, as are elaborate communication and locking systems.

Generally, the main role of the correctional officer in indirect supervision facilities is to operate the control systems and monitor inmate behaviour. Minor infractions are dealt with through limited intervention on the part of the officer; in the case of a major infraction, backup staff is called. Design of Direct Supervision Facilities The design of direct supervision institutions may be somewhat similar to that of indirect supervision facilities, but softer finishes, such as carpeting and upholstered furnishings, are often used. As well, rather than being separated from inmates by a barrier, staff members are stationed right inside living units with the inmates.

One of the primary duties of correctional officers in direct supervision facilities is to maintain personal contact with inmates. In fact, security depends upon the ability of highly trained staff to detect and defuse potential problems.

Direct supervision facilities tend to offer inmates more physical amenities, such as games tables, exercise equipment and access to controls for lights in their cells. Larger dayrooms are also more common. The larger living area helps normalize the environment and increases the likelihood that inmates will gravitate into smaller, more compatible groups.

Support for direct supervision is increasing and yet, outside of the federal prison system in the United States (the Federal Bureau of Prisons is a strong advocate of direct supervision), only a small minority of the 4,000 jails and prisons currently in existence in the United States are direct supervision facilities. Many more are being planned, however. In Canada, the Unit Management model of offender management, of which the Correctional Service of Canada is a strong proponent, is based on the principles of the direct supervision approach. Hybrid Institutions Some institutions are hybrids of direct and indirect supervision facilities. For example, some institutions have control-booths but also station officers directly in the housing units; finishes and furnishings can range from soft and residential to hard and institutional. The distinguishing feature of direct supervision is the constant, interactive presence of the correctional officer in the living unit. Study Methodology The present study examined differences between direct and indirect supervision facilities in such key factors as their construction and operating costs, safety and security, environment-behaviour issues (e.g., impact of soft furnishings and finishes on incidents of vandalism) and design issues (e.g., single versus multiple occupancy, types of finishes and furnishings). This information was gathered through a mail survey of correctional administrators and through case studies of direct and indirect supervision prisons and jails. Mail Survey A detailed survey was sent to administrators of a sample of direct and indirect supervision institutions, including both prisons and jails. The survey collected descriptive information about the institution, its design and operations, as well as such attitudinal information as satisfaction with the facility, problems and staff duties.

Institutions were selected to represent a variety of sizes, jurisdictions, security levels and regions. Minimum-security institutions were not included because the researchers felt there was little controversy over the use of direct supervision in these facilities. Of the 67 questionnaires sent out (47 to prisons and 20 to jails), 52 (78%) were returned (38 from prisons and 14 from jails).

Each responding facility was rated on a five-point scale of direct-to-indirect supervision styles. This rating was necessary because some institutions employed aspects of both direct and indirect supervision styles. The rating was based on the descriptions of management styles, as presented in the questionnaire, and on the physical layout of the institutions. For the comparative analysis reported below, facilities at opposite ends of the scale which could be characterized as "pure" direct supervision were compared with those which were "pure" indirect supervision. Results - Mail Survey Administrators rated direct supervision institutions significantly higher on measures of safety and on the ability to survey the inmate setting, as well as for the appropriateness of direct supervision, soft and moveable furniture and for the number of cell amenities. Surprisingly, direct supervision administrators were also more apt to feel that barred doors, which go against the philosophy of a normalized environment, were acceptable.

Correctional administrators at direct supervision institutions' also reported less violence than did administrators at indirect supervision institutions. The average number of violent incidents reported for a one-year period at direct supervision facilities was approximately 13; this compares to about 32 for the indirect supervision institutions. Case Studies In-depth on-site case studies were done at seven medium-security facilities (a combination of direct and indirect supervision jails and prisons). The study attempted to compare reasonably well-matched (in facility age, staffing, programs, etc.) samples of facilities. As well, attempts were made to control such other variables as staffing ratios, hardness or softness of the environment, the availability of resources and the type of inmate.

Some correctional institutions employ aspects of both direct and indirect supervision. In the case studies, institutions that had a preponderance of characteristics related to one supervision type or the other were selected. These were three jails - one indirect (where contact with inmates occurs intermittently during periodic officer tours of the living areas) and two "pure" direct supervision - and four prisons -two classic direct, one indirect and one hybrid direct supervision.

Data were gathered in the housing areas of the seven facilities by the use of:

- physical environment survey;
- behavioural tracking (where an observer watches, records and rates each episode of communication or interaction between staff and inmates or between staff members);
- staff and inmate questionnaires; and
- interviews with staff and inmates.

Results - Case Studies Physical Environment Survey No significant difference was recorded in size of cells, staffing patterns and comfort levels (e.g., temperature, sound levels) in the institutions surveyed. Indeed, staffing ratios appeared to be affected more by program choices at the institution than type of supervision.

As to cell structure, the institutions were predominantly designed for single cell occupancy, although the direct supervision prisons have a mixture of single- and double-occupancy cells.

Direct supervision institutions tended to provide more services at the housing unit. Furthermore, dayrooms in the direct supervision institutions were all rated as having soft environments (e.g., wood or fabric furnishings, vinyl or carpeted floors, wallboard) while those in the indirect supervision and hybrid institutions were all rated as hard (institutional blue or green colours, fixed steel furnishings). Supervision style did not affect the hardness or softness of cells, though.

Average building, staffing and operating costs were approximately 40% lower for the average direct supervision prison than for the average indirect supervision prison. In the direct supervision prison, the construction cost per bed was \$41,600, the annual staffing cost per inmate was \$10,900 and the annual maintenance cost per inmate was \$4,200. The corresponding figures for the average indirect supervision prison were \$73,000, \$17,300 and \$6,700. Behavioural Tracking Data on staff-inmate interaction were gathered at only five of the seven case-study sites (two direct supervision prisons, two direct supervision jails and one indirect supervision jail); data were unavailable for the other two sites (one indirect and one hybrid direct supervision prison).

The level of interaction was fairly high at all sites, with no apparent differences between direct and indirect supervision institutions. About half the interactions at the direct supervision facilities were initiated by staff and half by inmates. At the indirect supervision facility, however, almost all interactions (91.3%) were initiated by staff.

Most staff-initiated interactions (41% to 74%) at the direct supervision institutions were with inmates. At

the indirect supervision site, on the other hand, most staff-initiated interactions (72%) were with other staff members. Direct supervision officers appear to spend a greater proportion of their time interacting with inmates than do indirect supervision officers.

In all sites, the officer station was the most common location of both sorts of interactions, between staff and inmates and between members of the staff. This finding makes the placement of the officer station a critical issue in the design of the institution.

There were no major differences in the rated quality of interactions in both types of institutions; most were rated a 3 (for businesslike exchanges), and most were brief, lasting less than one minute.

Whether in a direct or indirect supervision facility, a universal finding was that having a second correctional officer present meant that both officers spent more time in or near the officer station and more time interacting with each other than with the inmates. Questionnaires A total of 612 inmate questionnaires and 264 staff questionnaires were completed at the seven study sites. For this article, only findings from the prison questionnaires will be presented. Inmates in this sample were mostly males between 22 and 40 years old who had typically been in the institution for six months to two years. Staff respondents typically were males between 22 and 40 years old, with some college education and in the job for one to five years.

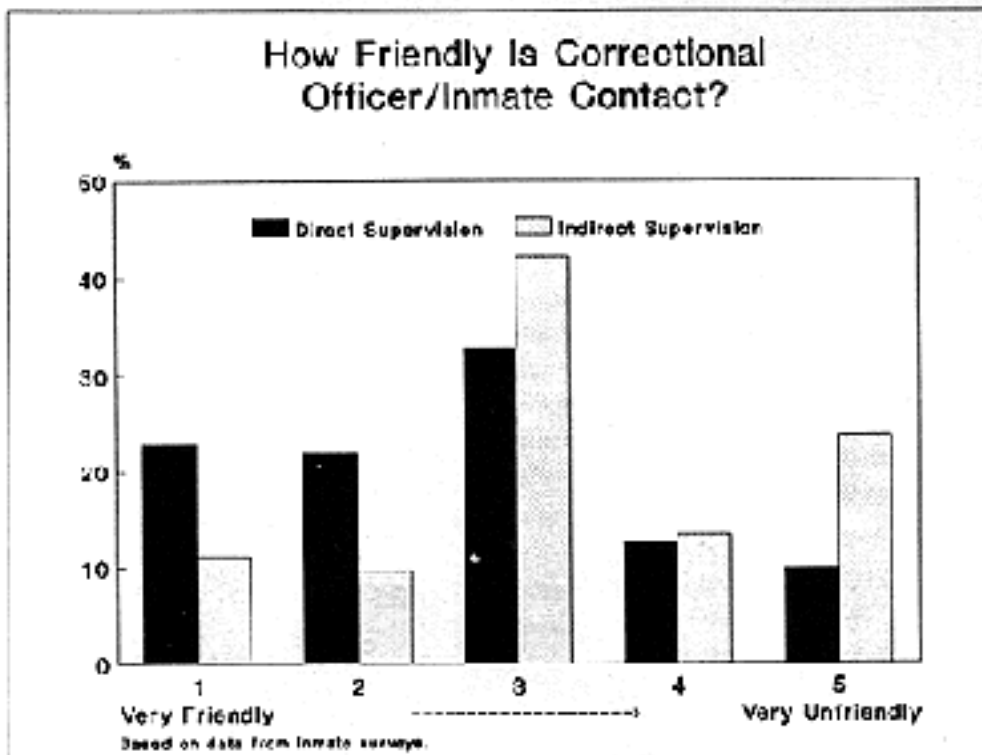
With the inmate surveys, a number of significant differences were noted between responses from direct supervision prisons and those from indirect supervision prisons. Significant differences on selected dimensions are reported in the table.

Table 1

| Selected Factors Showing Significant Differences Between Direct and Indirect Supervision Institutions* | | |
|---|--|--|
| Factor | Direct Supervision | Indirect Supervision |
| Incarceration | correctional officer(CO) counsels inmate more often | CO/inmate contacts less business like |
| | CO/inmate chat more often | |
| | CO/inmate contacts more pleasant | |
| | CO/inmate contacts less hostile | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Safety | feels less danger of CO/inmate attack CO's have quicker response time to emergencies CO/inmate fight less often | Feels less danger of inmate/inmate attack feels less danger of sexual assault |
| Vandalism | less frequent vandalism in room | |
| Satisfaction with Facility | more satisfied with room and day room more satisfied with indoor and outdoor recreation | more satisfied with dining |
| Privacy | more privacy in conversation | |
| General Satisfaction with Design Factors | more satisfied with amount of sunlight better outside view looks better than expected | colors more pleasant |
| Stress | less somatic stress | |
| * Based on inmate surveys | | |

Inmates in direct supervision prisons reported more contact between officers and staff and said that the contact was more pleasant and less hostile (see figure). They also saw less chance of officer-inmate attacks and officer-inmate fights and felt that vandalism occurred less frequently. The response time of correctional officers to emergencies in direct supervision prisons was better, as well. Notably, however, inmates at direct supervision facilities also saw a greater chance of inmate-inmate attacks and sexual assaults.



Inmates in the direct supervision prisons reported significantly fewer somatic complaints. They also felt more satisfied generally with the appearance and cleanliness of their rooms and the dayroom. They were, however, significantly less satisfied with the availability of such amenities as recreation, telephones and televisions, a finding partially accounted for by the higher levels of overcrowding at the direct supervision prisons. How Friendly Is Correctional Officer/Inmate Contact? Surveys of staff members at direct supervision institutions elicited less positive results. They generally felt less safe than staff from indirect supervision facilities: they reported higher probabilities of sexual assault, reported feeling less safe in the living unit and believed it was more difficult for an inmate to contact an officer. On the other hand, staff members at direct supervision facilities reported being more satisfied with the design of the correctional officer station and gave a more positive rating to the surveillance capabilities in the living area and residential control areas. They also reported significantly more inmate-officer communication.

Staff members from the indirect supervision prisons rated their institutions significantly higher on measures of privacy afforded in various areas (shower, toilet, talking with an inmate), the appropriateness of space allocations (in rooms, for meals, for telephones) and the availability of amenities. These findings may again be in part due to crowded conditions at the direct supervision prisons. Conclusion Overall, it appears that interaction between staff and inmates at direct supervision facilities was less hostile, more pleasant and more often initiated by inmates than in indirect supervision institutions. Furthermore, correctional officers in direct supervision institutions tended to spend more time interacting with inmates. Staff at indirect supervision facilities, on the other hand, spent more time interacting with other staff members.

In safety issues, the results are mixed. Inmates at direct supervision facilities rated their institutions more positively on a number of safety measures. On the other hand, staff members at direct supervision facilities rated their institutions more negatively on many safety variables. In interpreting these findings, the researchers warn that the benefits of a direct supervision approach may be impeded if this approach is

not supported by a commitment from management. Some situations were observed in which correctional officers who were in direct contact with inmates had not been given the kind of training, support and management commitment that accompany the direct supervision philosophy. In these cases, staff members were more likely to feel vulnerable and less safe, and were generally uncomfortable with that level of contact with inmates. Because staff is in such close and frequent contact with inmates, proper training for staff and classification of inmates are important prerequisites to making direct supervision work. Indeed, it was found that direct supervision facilities overall take more effort and commitment to plan, train for and manage.

Jay Farbstein & Associates, Inc. with Richard Wener. (1989). "A Comparison of 'Direct' and 'Indirect' Supervision Correctional Facilities - Final Report." National Institute of Corrections - Prison Division, United States Department of Justice.