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The Jail and the Community

Comparing Jails in Rural and Urban Contexts

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Most of the available research on jails focuses on large institutions, located in urban areas. In this study we empirically consider whether this emphasis shortchanges our understanding of jails by comparing 2,638 rural and urban jails on four dimensions: jail size and use, inmate characteristics, staff characteristics, and inmate services. Our results reveal several important cleavages between rural and urban jails. Based on our findings and a conception of jails as influenced in meaningful ways by their social, political, and organizational contexts, we suggest avenues for future research on local incarceration.

Keywords: *rural; urban; jails*

As recently as 1988, Mays and Thompson considered the available literature on jails and concluded that “although they occupy a position of strategic importance in the criminal justice system, they have received an amazing lack of scholarly attention” (p. 423). Certainly, however, advances have been made. Several books have substantially contributed to the theoretical and empirical knowledge base on jails (e.g., Irwin, 1985; Thompson & Mays, 1991; Welsh, 1995; Zupan, 1991). Also, more jail scholarship has been published recently in academic journals than in the past. In their 1988 article, Mays and Thompson reported that “a review of the *Criminal Justice Periodicals Index (CJPI)* as far back as 1982 reveals that fewer than ten articles on the subject [of jails] have appeared in the scholarly journals” (p. 423). When we checked the same index for 1999 through 2004, we found 121 references where the word jail appeared in the title or abstract. Reviewing each one revealed that some were not scholarly work and others actually addressed

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prison and not jail issues. Still, 54 scholarly papers on jail inmates, staff, and other topics published during this 5-year period were indexed in the *CJPI*.

The existing body of scholarship, though growing, is hobbled by a nearly exclusive focus on large jails in urban areas. The most recent report based on the Bureau of Justice Statistics's *Annual Survey of Jails*, for example, gives aggregate data on a sample of jails meant to represent all jails in the United States (Harrison & Beck, 2005). Detailed data on individual jurisdictions, however, are presented only for the 50 largest jails in the country, 49 of which are located in areas defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as metropolitan. Evaluations and other jail research efforts also have tended to draw data from large urban jurisdictions. Of the 54 studies published between 1999 and 2004 and indexed in the *CJPI*, 39 reported enough information for us to determine whether rural jurisdictions had been a part of the research.¹ Only four of them included data from both urban and rural jails, and none focused exclusively on rural facilities.

From the standpoint of understanding jail-inmate populations or jail staff, the bias toward urban and larger jails seems quite reasonable. Taken together, the 50 largest jail jurisdictions accounted for 220,556 of the 713,990 inmates held in jails on June 30, 2004 (Harrison & Beck, 2005). Thus, 50 out of the more than 3,000 jails in the country housed nearly one third of all jail inmates. The focus on urban jails also may reflect a practical issue of methodology. Most quantitative analyses require a reasonably large number of cases. A large sample of inmates or jail staff can be obtained far more easily from a single large jurisdiction than from multiple smaller ones.

One notable exception to the tendency to study large jails is Mays and Thompson's (1988) comparison of small and large jurisdictions.² The researchers used data from the 1983 *National Jail Census*, which included information on 3,338 locally administered jails across the United States. Their analyses compared small jails, defined as those "with a rated capacity of ten or fewer inmates," with larger facilities (p. 422). Mays and Thompson's results revealed that small jails differ from large ones on much more than just size. There are operational differences—such as higher costs per inmate, higher staff-to-inmate ratios, and fewer programs and services—higher inmate mortality rates, and less crowding among small jails. Moreover, the researchers observed that small jails must contend with older physical plants, with very limited local budgets, with difficulties in separating males from females and adult inmates from juveniles, and with other realities such as sheriffs placing emphasis on law-enforcement activities rather than jailing. Thus, examining the numerous small jails throughout the country revealed that they diverge in important ways from the more often studied large jails.

In this article, we take up Mays and Thompson's (1988) suggestion that the concentration on large urban jails may shortchange scholarly understanding of local incarceration. However, we take a somewhat different approach by comparing jails in rural areas with those in metropolitan jurisdictions. Surely, there will be some overlap. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the small jails in Mays and Thompson's data were found in largely rural midwestern and western states. Still, using the rural-urban framework continues a line of research in other aspects of criminal justice and may help to reveal differences in jails beyond small and large.

In his seminal literature review published more than a dozen years ago, Klofas (1990a) suggested that jail research was largely devoid of any broad organizing principles. He went on to argue that the concept of community context could be usefully applied to guide our thinking about and studying jails. He construed *community* broadly to include not only geographically defined areas but also institutional arrangements of the criminal justice system, functional considerations of social control, and social connections with the street. Bearing more directly on the current study, Klofas acknowledged the meager existing research on the role of urbanization in understanding local jails. Still, he suggested that compared to their urban counterparts, rural jails tend to be older, more isolated, in poorer condition, less likely to use outside professional services, and serve a different clientele (1990a, p. 80).

More recent research reinforces the suggestion that rural-urban distinctions are important to understanding criminal justice issues. Weisheit and Wells (1996) argued convincingly that rural settings are important geographically, culturally, and in terms of crime and criminal justice. They observed that approximately one quarter of U.S. citizens live in rural areas and that three fourths of U.S. counties are nonmetropolitan. Culturally, residents of rural areas tend to be wary of outsiders and to have closer social connections with each other, despite the tendency for greater physical separation. Furthermore, research shows rural-urban differences in policing (Falcone, Wells, & Weisheit, 2002; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Maguire, Kuhns, Uchida, & Cox, 1997; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1994), probation (Ellsworth & Weisheit, 1997; Olson, Weisheit, & Ellsworth, 2001), patterns of illegal drug production and use (Brock, Copeland, Scott, & Ethridge, 2001; Hafley & Tewksbury, 1995; Weisheit, 1993), and the distribution of crime (Thompson, 1996). An article, published in 1982, has contrasted rural against urban jails (Handberg, 1982). The data used, however, are now more than 25 years old. Events in the past three decades may have changed the nature of local correctional facilities, and no contemporary assessments are currently available that distinguish the characteristics of rural and metropolitan jails. To begin

resolving this limitation in the literature, we compare jails located in rural counties to those in urbanized counties on aspects of jail facilities, inmates, staff, and services.

Method

Sample and Jail Data

Data on jail characteristics were drawn from the Bureau of Justice Statistics's *National Jail Census, 1999* (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). The census includes a host of variables on 3,084 separate jurisdictions in the United States that operate at least one jail facility. We grouped the available data into four domains: the jail facility and its use, staff characteristics, inmate characteristics, and inmate services.

Because our study was concerned with understanding jails in context, it was important to define the community of interest such that it would be comparable across cases. We, therefore, removed all cases from the data set that were administered at some level of government other than the county level. Thus, federal jails, city jails, and private facilities are not included in our analysis. We also removed regional jails from the data set. Although regional jails are an important development in local incarceration, we suspect that they are unique enough that they should be considered separately from traditional jails administered by single counties. With these restrictions, our analysis included 2,638 jails representing all public facilities in the United States that are operated by individual counties.³

Rurality

Several authors have suggested that defining places as rural is a complex consideration. The issue is stated succinctly by Ellsworth and Weisheit (1997): "Although the general idea is familiar to most, there are a variety of ways in which the concept can be measured, none of which accurately captures all of its dimensions" (p. 212). One popular way of operationalizing rurality is by the size of a jurisdiction's population. Ellsworth and Weisheit in their study of probation, for example, identified rural counties as those with fewer than 50,000 residents. A shortcoming of this approach is that small counties adjacent to large metropolitan areas may be treated the same as those that are more independent. Recognizing this, Ellsworth and Weisheit also analyzed their data on probation departments using an ordinal indicator

Table 1
Distribution of Included Counties by ERS-USDA
Rural–Urban Continuum Codes

Code	Description	<i>N</i>	%
1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more	359	13.6
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population	304	11.5
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population	309	11.7
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area	203	7.7
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area	97	3.7
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area	559	21.2
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area	392	14.9
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area	165	6.3
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area	250	9.5

of rurality that had been developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Notably, both techniques produced the same pattern of results.

To operationalize rurality for the present study, we chose to use the more comprehensive and precise coding scheme developed by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The rural–urban continuum codes, which range from 1 (*the most urban counties*) to 9 (*the most rural counties*), capture considerations of population size, physical proximity, and economic integration, providing for the possibility of urban influences on neighboring nonmetropolitan counties (Economic Research Service, 2004). The distribution of counties included in the present study within the rural–urban continuum codes for 2003 is shown in Table 1.⁴

Results

Our analysis of rural and urban jails begins with Table 2 where we present comparisons of jail facilities and how they are used. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most dramatic difference between rural and metropolitan jails

Table 2
Facility Characteristics by Type of County

	Rural—Metro Continuum Code									Pearson Correlation
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Total under jurisdiction	810.8	379.0	215.8	130.6	97.1	59.7	43.4	25.1	18.8	-.30
Confined	700.7	349.9	192.8	126.4	91.3	58.4	41.7	24.7	17.6	-.30
Not confined	110.1	29.1	23.0	4.2	5.8	1.3	1.7	0.4	1.2	-.15
ADP	701.3	347.0	191.3	126.5	94.5	58.5	42.2	23.4	17.6	-.29
New admissions (1 week)	200.8	113.9	77.8	48.1	37.9	18.4	15.1	9.3	5.0	-.34
No new admissions (%)	12.5	14.5	12.9	12.3	15.5	14.3	13.8	17.6	29.6	.08
Capacity	717.5	370.7	205.7	142.1	110.5	68.7	50.4	31.1	24.3	-.32
Mean % of capacity	98.2	95.9	97.2	93.6	89.1	87.8	83.5	75.7	62.9	-.25
Mean % inmates convicted	38.8	36.8	39.2	41.2	38.0	45.3	46.3	46.6	51.4	.14
Mean % inmates held for any other jurisdiction	25.3	26.3	30.0	25.4	33.1	29.4	33.7	30.9	36.9	.08
federal	4.3	4.4	4.5	3.4	3.6	2.8	3.6	4.2	2.6	-.04
state	16.7	18.8	22.4	18.6	26.4	23.4	26.1	22.1	27.4	.09
local	4.3	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.6	6.9	.05
Under any court order (%)	17.0	18.8	15.9	15.8	12.4	10.7	9.9	12.7	12.0	-.08
Facility age (oldest building)	21.2	25.4	29.0	24.4	23.7	30.4	32.7	39.0	42.6	.19
Any renovation (%)	51.4	46.2	55.5	51.1	52.9	43.3	42.7	47.2	44.0	-.06
Years since last renovation	5.1	17.0	7.0	6.3	7.3	8.1	8.0	8.4	10.2	.00

is their size. By several measures shown in Table 2, it is clear that metropolitan jails tend to be larger. Compared to jails in rural areas, those in metropolitan counties typically supervise more inmates—both those who are confined and those who are not physically in the jail—have a higher average daily population, admit more inmates per week, and have the capacity to house substantially more inmates.

Despite this tendency, it is notable that rural jails are not always small and are not always smaller than metropolitan jails. Considering capacity, for example, jails in the most rural counties (code 9) ranged from one to 548 inmates, and nearly one quarter (23%) could house more than 100 inmates. Some urban jails (code 1) also are fairly small, with capacities dropping as low as nine, and one in four maintaining space for fewer than 100 inmates. Still, half of the most rural jails could hold no more than 15 inmates, and the 21 largest metropolitan jails in the sample topped capacities of more than 3,000 inmates. Because of the vast differences in jail size, most of the remaining statistics we present are expressed as rates or percentages, allowing for consideration of what differences may exist that cannot be explained by jail size alone.

Table 2 presents additional comparisons that show a somewhat less dramatic divide between rural and urban jails. Metropolitan jails tend to be at a higher percent of their capacity, confirming what others have suggested; that is, crowding is a bigger problem for metropolitan than for rural jurisdictions (Kerle, 1998; Mays & Thompson, 1988). Accordingly, there is also a minor trend toward more metropolitan districts being more likely to be under a court order for some condition of confinement. Perhaps partially because they are less often filled to capacity, the more rural jails are slightly more likely to hold inmates for other jurisdictions, especially state authorities, and a larger percentage of their inmates, on average, have been convicted. A fairly consistent trend can be discerned across the rural–urban continuum regarding facility age, where more urbanized areas tend to have newer facilities. In fact, the oldest structures still in use in the most rural counties average more than 20 years older than those in the most metropolitan ones. There is no consistent relationship, however, between a county's place on the rural–urban continuum and how recently the jail has been renovated.

In Table 3, we turn our attention to staff characteristics. Like the total size of facilities, we see a dramatic and not unexpected trend in the number of people employed by these institutions: the more metropolitan the county, the larger on average the total number of staff and the number of correctional officers. On average, the total number of staff and the total number of correctional officers in the most metropolitan jails are more than 15 times these figures for the most rural jails.

Table 3
Staff Characteristics by Type of County

	Rural–Metro Continuum Code									Pearson Correlation
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Total number of staff	215.0	108.8	56.0	41.9	31.8	22.1	18.1	13.8	12.7	-31
Mean % full-time staff	94.0	92.8	90.9	90.0	89.4	86.5	84.0	85.2	80.3	-27
Inmate-to-staff ratio	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.1	2.9	2.4	2.0	1.3	-24
Total COs	138.2	73.8	40.7	29.4	22.1	15.1	11.3	9.0	8.6	-35
Inmate-to-CO ratio	5.6	4.5	4.3	4.5	4.1	3.9	3.3	2.7	1.8	-12
CO-to-administrator ratio	24.2	18.9	15.2	14.0	12.1	8.5	7.4	6.7	5.7	-29
Mean % employees female	32.6	32.8	34.3	34.1	34.8	35.1	35.7	37.0	39.5	.11
Mean % employees White	75.6	78.7	79.7	81.5	80.3	81.9	87.0	87.9	92.3	.18
Mean % employees Black	12.5	12.8	11.5	9.6	9.7	11.3	5.7	8.2	3.9	-13
Mean % employees Hispanic	4.0	3.6	3.4	3.9	4.4	3.8	4.7	1.8	1.7	-03
Mean % employees other race	7.9	5.0	5.4	5.0	5.5	2.9	2.7	2.1	2.0	-10
Mean % COs female	25.8	27.4	29.4	28.4	29.2	32.0	32.5	34.2	38.7	.17
Mean % COs White	75.8	78.6	79.3	81.1	78.4	81.2	85.9	86.2	91.8	.16
Mean % COs Black	13.8	13.8	11.8	10.2	10.0	12.0	6.1	9.0	3.4	-14
Mean % COs Hispanic	4.5	4.0	3.7	4.3	6.0	4.4	5.5	2.1	2.1	-02
Mean % COs other race	5.9	3.6	5.2	4.3	5.6	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.6	-07
Assaults on staff (%)	46.0	42.4	34.6	37.4	33.0	20.8	19.4	8.5	8.4	-28
Staff TB tested (%)	86.6	84.9	84.5	89.2	83.5	77.1	79.3	66.1	68.4	-14

Again, differences beyond mere size emerge as well. It appears that rural jails differ somewhat from metropolitan jails in their staffing patterns. Rural jails tend to employ more staff and more correctional officers per inmate. Inmate-to-staff and inmate-to-correctional officer ratios decline by half or more moving from the urban to the rural end of the continuum. There is also evidence of administrative economy of scale. The ratio of correctional officers to administrators diminishes monotonically in more rural jurisdictions. Staff also differ somewhat in their racial and gender makeup. Racial differences are fairly small but in expected directions. Smaller percentages of rural jail personnel tend to be Black or Hispanic, and larger percentages are White. Slightly larger proportions of jail personnel in rural jails are female.

Finally, Table 3 reports results on two variables that might be thought of as aspects of staff safety. As shown, metropolitan jails were much more likely to report that a staff member was assaulted during the 1-year period from July 1998 to June 1999. Less than 10% of the jails in the two most rural classifications reported an assault on staff, compared to more than 40% of the jails in the two most metropolitan classifications. The relationship between rurality and testing for tuberculosis among jail staff was more modest. Still, there is a notable trend toward rural jails being less likely to report that they test staff for this disease.

Table 4 reports comparisons of demographic and other characteristics of inmates. There is virtually no relationship between rurality and the percent of inmates who are juveniles or the percent of inmates who are not U.S. citizens. Regardless of where a county falls on the rural–urban continuum, these figures hover just under 2% and just more than 3%, respectively. Some moderate divides are evident, however, by race. Smaller proportions of the inmate populations of rural jails are Black. Moreover, the percent of inmates who are White is 18 points higher among jails in the most rural counties compared to those in the most metropolitan areas. It might be asserted that this difference could be explained as a function of the differential demographics of the general population—rural areas might be populated more by Whites, who are therefore more available to be incarcerated. To provide a partial assessment of this possibility, we gathered race data from the 2000 U.S. Census.⁵ For all counties coded 1 or 9 on the rural–urban continuum, we determined the percentage of the general population that was White, non-Hispanic. For urban counties, the average percentage of White was 79.2%; for the rural counties it was 85.4%, confirming that rural areas of the nation tend to be populated by larger portions of Whites. We also compared the percentage of White for each jail to the percentage of White in its county population. The percentage of White in metropolitan counties averaged 27.2%

Table 4
Inmate Characteristics by Type of County

	Rural—Metro Continuum Code									Pearson Correlation
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Mean % White	51.7	54.4	55.6	59.5	58.8	61.9	65.7	65.8	70.2	.18
Mean % Black	29.3	28.0	26.6	24.4	22.3	24.0	14.9	20.8	13.7	-.18
Mean % Hispanic	8.7	8.8	7.7	8.4	9.4	8.5	11.4	7.6	8.2	.01
Mean % other race	7.9	6.7	6.9	4.6	5.4	4.4	7.0	4.0	6.0	-.04
Mean % female	11.0	10.4	10.0	9.9	10.1	9.3	9.0	7.3	6.5	-.14
Mean % juvenile	1.5	1.7	1.4	1.8	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.1	1.6	-.01
Mean % Non-U.S. citizens	2.0	3.2	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.6	.03
Any HIV positive (%)	42.9	37.8	30.1	32.0	17.5	14.8	10.5	5.5	2.8	-.33
Any TB suspected or confirmed (%)	47.9	37.2	32.4	34.0	25.8	21.3	14.8	15.2	8.4	-.27

points higher than their jail populations. For rural areas, this gap was substantially smaller at 15.0% points. Thus, the demographics of the general population help to explain the rural–urban difference in inmate racial makeup, but they do not offer a complete answer. We are left with the fact that the population of rural jails more closely approximates the distribution of Whites in their respective counties.

The final two variables in Table 4 show considerable differences between metropolitan and rural jails in whether they are confronting infectious diseases among inmates. More than 4 in 10 of the most metropolitan jails reported having at least one HIV-positive inmate, and almost half of these facilities believed one or more inmates had tuberculosis. At the opposite end of the continuum, less than 3% of the most rural jails had any HIV-positive inmates and less than 9% reported a suspected or confirmed case of tuberculosis. These differences may be a function of the number of inmates who pass through rural versus urban jails, but they may also reflect differential efforts to detect infectious diseases.

The final portion of our analysis focuses on services provided to inmates in metropolitan and rural jail facilities. The first five variables listed in Table 5 concern health-related services. The Pearson correlation between the rural–urban continuum and whether mental health services are provided suggest a slight negative relationship. This association appears largely to be driven by a distinction between the two most rural categories of counties and the remaining counties. A much stronger and somewhat more consistent relationship is revealed for whether a jail reported having on-site medical services. Jails are substantially more likely to have medical services on the premises if they are located in more urban counties. Larger percentages of the more urbanized jails also report testing inmates for infectious diseases. Jail jurisdictions with a population of 1 million or more residents are more than 3.5 times more likely to report testing inmates for HIV at some time during their incarceration compared to the most rural jail jurisdictions. Rural jails, however, are less likely to charge inmates for whatever health care services are provided.

The pattern of jails in metropolitan counties more often providing inmate services than jails in rural counties continues when we consider work opportunities. Overall, the most metropolitan jails are almost twice as likely as the most rural jails to provide inmate work programs. Rural jails are substantially less likely to employ inmates in facility-support positions such as custodial or food-service work. They are also less likely to allow inmates to work on public projects—such as trash cleanup or road work—outside the jail. Even farming and other agricultural work, which is relatively scarce among metropolitan jails, is available slightly less often in rural jails.

Table 5
Percent of Jails That Offer Inmate Services by Type of County

	Rural–Metro Continuum Code									Pearson Correlation
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Mental health services	90.0	86.2	87.7	88.2	85.6	86.8	88.3	80.0	76.4	-08
On-site medical	51.5	49.8	48.9	57.6	38.1	29.7	19.6	15.2	10.8	-31
Charge for health care	67.1	62.5	59.5	68.0	58.8	53.3	49.5	40.6	36.8	-18
HIV testing	75.5	66.8	64.4	73.9	58.8	47.6	38.5	24.2	20.4	-35
TB testing	88.3	81.9	82.8	88.2	75.3	76.0	76.3	67.9	61.6	-17
Any work for confined inmates	83.6	75.7	72.8	79.3	72.2	67.6	63.5	53.3	43.2	-22
Facility support	71.6	65.0	59.9	69.0	57.7	51.7	43.4	38.8	29.2	-25
Public works	59.6	48.8	53.7	53.7	45.4	44.0	36.5	29.1	26.0	-19
Correctional industry	10.0	6.3	3.2	2.0	2.1	2.3	1.3	1.8	1.6	-13
Farming/agriculture	9.7	10.9	10.4	10.8	7.2	6.4	4.3	5.5	1.6	-11
Any education for confined inmates	76.3	68.1	65.4	68.5	73.2	53.7	52.3	37.0	36.4	-24
ABE	40.7	32.3	25.6	28.1	25.8	16.3	16.6	13.9	8.4	-22
GED	70.2	61.1	61.5	63.1	71.1	48.5	45.9	31.5	34.0	-23
Voc ed	15.3	11.6	7.4	5.4	6.2	1.6	1.8	1.8	0.8	-20
College	5.3	3.6	1.9	4.9	2.1	1.1	4.6	1.2	2.8	-04
Study release	10.0	10.6	12.0	9.4	15.5	5.9	8.4	5.5	8.0	-05
Any special programs for confined inmates	87.5	81.3	81.9	83.3	74.2	76.0	78.3	69.7	61.6	-15
Life skills	39.8	35.0	26.5	26.1	13.4	10.0	9.9	6.1	4.4	-31
Parenting	27.6	23.1	12.6	11.3	8.2	4.8	4.1	4.2	2.4	-26
Employment	27.9	24.1	19.4	13.8	13.4	6.3	7.4	4.2	2.8	-25
Drug counseling	68.2	61.4	59.5	60.6	45.4	43.5	47.4	37.0	34.8	-21
Religious/spiritual	76.3	73.0	71.5	74.9	60.8	61.4	63.8	55.2	49.2	-16
Psychological	56.0	48.7	49.2	53.7	46.4	41.5	44.9	27.9	25.6	-16
Sex offender	8.9	10.2	9.1	10.3	5.2	8.1	9.9	6.7	4.8	-03

Provision of educational opportunities follows the same trend. Continuing with Table 5, it is notable that overall rural jails less often provide any educational opportunities for inmates. More than three quarters of the most metropolitan jails offer some form of education for inmates. In contrast, just over one third of the most rural jails do. Looking at the specific types of education available, it is clear that this pattern is driven largely by adult basic education (ABE) and general educational development (GED) courses. Study release programs, vocational education, and particularly college education are rarely available even among metropolitan jails.

The final portion of Table 5 reports on the availability of treatment-oriented inmate programs. With the exception of sex-offender programming, these services are available consistently more often among metropolitan jails than among their rural counterparts. Inmates of rural jails are highly unlikely to have access to life skills, parenting classes, or employment counseling, whereas at least 1 in 4 jails in metropolitan areas of at least 250,000 population (codes 1 and 2) report that they provide these services. Even the most widely available services—drug counseling, spiritual or religious programming, and psychological services—exist substantially more frequently among more urban jail jurisdictions. In short, jail inmates are far less likely to have access to most assistive services if they are confined in more rural jails.

Discussion

Understanding the administration, structure, and operation of jails in the United States should be a primary objective of criminal-justice researchers. Jails touch a tremendous number of lives each year as people are booked, serve typically short stays in jail, and are released again. The actual number of people who pass through our nation's jails each year is difficult to determine, but in 1990 Klofas estimated 16 million admissions and releases annually (Klofas, 1990a). The one-day count of jail inmates in custody has climbed more than 75% since 1990 (Harrison & Beck, 2005), and there is no indication that the processing of inmates has not risen at a similar rate. Moreover, jails maintain a central role in local criminal justice systems. The nature and function of jails are intimately connected with the practices and policies of police, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation and parole agencies, state prisons, and others (Bolduc, 1985; Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2000; Davis, Applegate, Otto, Surette, & McCarthy, 2004; Hall, Henry, Perlstein, & Smith, 1985). With the broad reach and interconnectedness of jails in mind, we sought in this study to shed additional light on American jails by exploring differences across rural and urban areas.

Our results revealed some clear differences among jails based on their location within a rural or more urban context. Not surprisingly, more metropolitan jails tended to be larger—their capacities were greater, they held more inmates at a single time, they booked and released more inmates, and they employed more staff. Rural jails, however, were less crowded. On average, metropolitan jails were filled beyond 90% of their capacities. In contrast, more rural jails dipped as low as 62% full, on average. We noted that the more rural jails also tended to be older, with those facilities in the most rural counties averaging twice the age of those in the most urban areas. Beyond these issues of jail facilities, our results also showed that rurality was related to staffing patterns. Women made up a larger portion of the staff of rural jails. Rural jails showed the possibility of closer supervision for both inmates and correctional officers. Their inmate-to-correctional officer ratios and correctional officer-to-administrator ratios tended to be lower than those of urban jails. In some ways, urban jails appeared to be more dangerous. Staff were more likely to report being assaulted, and tuberculosis and HIV were more likely among inmates. Some of the difference in reporting of infectious diseases, however, may be due to differential testing practices. Rural jails were less likely to test inmates, and therefore may have been less aware of cases of tuberculosis and HIV. Finally, our findings also showed that the more rural the county, the less often jails provided services for inmates. On-site medical personnel, work opportunities, education programs, and counseling and rehabilitative programming were available considerably less frequently in more rural jails.

Despite these differences, we do not want to overstate the gap between rural and urban jails. Of 68 separate characteristics we examined, only about one quarter showed correlations with the rural–urban continuum that reached .25 or greater. Furthermore, 19 correlations were less than .10. Thus, at best the correlation between rurality and jail characteristics could be considered modest. A substantial amount of variation among jails remains to be explained.

A potentially fruitful avenue of future research would examine other aspects of the context of local jails. We certainly are not the first authors to suggest that community context is important to understanding local jails. Klofas (1990a) usefully observed that jails can be considered an expression of social control within a community. Thompson and Mays (1991) discussed how jails can be influenced by local politics, funding, public attitudes, and other aspects of their environment. Our analysis is consistent with these conceptual orientations, but we must acknowledge that it is only a beginning. We are in the same situation as Ellsworth and Weisheit (1997) when they studied rural and urban probationers; we can describe differences, but without more information about the social context of jails we cannot explain them.

There also is more work to be done measuring and understanding jail characteristics. The data we drew from the Bureau of Justice Statistics's National Jail Census can portray jails only in broad strokes, and many aspects of jails deserve more detailed attention. Based on some of the rural–urban discrepancies revealed in our analyses, we can suggest three clear possibilities. First, in terms of jail organization, we were able to identify rural–urban differences in officer–administrator ratios. We also observed that correctional officers are called upon to supervise relatively fewer inmates in rural facilities, and that women and minorities are employed at somewhat differential rates in urban and rural jails. Although these bits of information help provide a portrait of jailing in the United States, they are purely descriptive and rather limited in scope. Future studies should expand investigations of jails as complex institutions that are shaped at least in part by their context. Theorists and researchers have greatly advanced the policing literature by drawing on institutional theory (Crank, 2003; Crank & Langworthy, 1992). Such an approach may be fruitful for understanding jails as well.

Second, variations in inmate services merit additional investigation. Our analysis determined only whether certain categories of programs were available to inmates. Research is needed on the nature of available programs. A substantial body of theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that offender treatment programs are most successful at reducing recidivism if they follow certain principles. Programs that are cognitive-behavioral in approach, intervene with high-risk offenders, seek to change characteristics that are known to be related to criminality, and are responsive to individual differences are far more likely to result in reduced offending than programs that do not (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). We should seek to determine the extent to which rural and urban jails are operating programs in ways that are likely to reduce recidivism.

Third, the possible differential in staff and inmate safety across rural and urban contexts should be investigated more closely. We found that rural inmates are less likely to be tested for infectious diseases, but that rural jails also are less likely to confront HIV-positive and TB-infected inmates. Furthermore, our analyses revealed that, in some ways, staff in urban jails were safer—they were more likely to receive TB testing—but in other ways they were at greater personal risk—assaults on staff were more likely. Clearly there are additional measures of correctional-facility safety that ought to be examined. Keller and Wang (2005), for example, recently reported that inmate-on-inmate assaults were more than eight times more likely in urban than in rural Texas jails. Inmate-on-staff assaults, however, were unrelated to rurality in their study. What begins to emerge, then, is a picture of urban jails as more threatening to the well-being of inmates and staff, but more detailed analyses of dangerousness are needed.

Conclusion

Weisheit (1993, p. 217) characterized the scholarship on illegal drug production as suffering from urban ethnocentrism, a bias that has circumscribed theory and research. The results reported here reveal that focusing research attention on large, urban jails to the exclusion of those in rural areas likewise truncates our understanding of local incarceration. The community context of jails—as measured by their location on the rural–urban continuum—matters, and studies of inmates, officers, facilities, and operations should examine local jails in rural areas as well as those in more urbanized centers.

Rurality, however, captures only one aspect of community context. Our work in combination with that of other researchers indicates a need for a broader view. Klofas (1987, 1990b, 1991), for example, has demonstrated that the crime rate and the size of the general population of counties are related to the way jails are used. Thompson (1986; Thompson & Mays, 1991) suggested that political considerations are essential to understanding jail processes. And, as noted above, several authors have argued in favor of studying jails within the context of other components of local criminal justice (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Hall et al., 1985; Welsh, 1995). Although some observers “have tended to view some aspects of local jails as idiosyncratic” (Klofas, 1990a, p. 70), we believe too little research has thus far been attempted to dismiss the possibility that comparative studies conducted within the framework of community context can lead to more complete understanding of jails in America.

Notes

1. Five articles dealt with such issues as jail law or policy without studying any particular facility or facilities. An additional 10 studies did not provide enough information about the jail or jails where the data were collected for us to determine whether any were located in rural contexts.

2. Scholars tend to conflate jail size and rurality, and we continue this practice to ease discussion of the prior literature. As we report below, however, a great deal of variation in size exists among jails within rural and urban areas. We also do not intend to suggest that no other studies have investigated small or rural jail issues (see, e.g., Handberg, 1982). Studies on large, urban jails, however, far outnumber those that present data on smaller jails or those in rural areas.

3. For some analyses, the number of available cases is reduced by nonresponse to some items in the *National Jail Census, 1999*.

4. Rural–urban continuum codes are also available for 1974, 1983, and 1993. We chose to use the 2003 codes because they resulted in the smallest temporal difference between county coding for rurality and the data from the National Jail Census collected in 1999.

5. These data were obtained from Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3) through the U.S. Census Bureau Web site (www.census.gov).

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