



Prisons and Rural Communities: Exploring Impact and Community Satisfaction

A report by:

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Executive Summary

In 2005-2006, researchers from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania examined the relationship between rural communities and State Correctional Institutions (SCIs) in four rural communities throughout the state.

The research team used a community satisfaction survey, focus groups with community members, and discussions with prison administrators to identify issues and propose policy considerations to ease community-prison relations for current prisons and future prison sitings.

According to the research findings, several issues impact prison-community relationships, including the prison siting process itself, the infrastructure in the community, and communication between the prison and the community.

Policy considerations that may improve the siting process and the relationship between prisons and communities are as follows:

- Personnel from the SCIs should initiate contact with community members to inform them of changes in prison administration.
- Prison administrators should implement and actively employ community advisory groups in an effort to

enhance ongoing communication between the prison and the local community.

- The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) should consider siting SCIs in areas that have adequate infrastructure and other services such as schools, local businesses, health care facilities, housing, entertainment, and shopping, sufficient to attract and retain potential employees.
- The DOC should consider strategies to permit more purchasing by the SCIs of local equipment and supplies.
- At the time of prison siting, a joint committee comprised of representatives from the DOC and the local water/sewer authority should determine the ability of the local water and sewage system to meet the needs of the prison and community;
- Beginning at the time of siting, DOC personnel and persons involved in the siting process should be realistic in their claims regarding the potential economic impact of the prison on the local community; and
- A best practices siting manual should be developed for new prison siting.



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Introduction

As an industry, prisons can be particularly enticing and potentially important in rural areas, especially in communities that are struggling economically. As is often true nationally, the majority of Pennsylvania's state correctional institutions are located in rural communities. Given the promise, or at least the possibility, of economic revitalization, many residents see the placing (or siting) of a prison in their local community as desirable.

This research measured the perception of the economic impact of, and community satisfaction with, correctional facilities located within selected rural communities in Pennsylvania. Information was collected that can assist both the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and rural communities that are either considering prison development in the future or looking to improve existing relationships between themselves and their correctional facilities.

For this research, four State Correctional Institutions (SCIs) and their respective communities were studied: SCIs Albion, Cambridge Springs, Dallas and Houtzdale. (See Map). These prisons were selected because they represent different geographic areas within the state and had been operating for a time sufficient to assess prison-community relations. Three of the four prisons were sited within a time frame recent enough for community leaders and residents to recall the siting history and process.

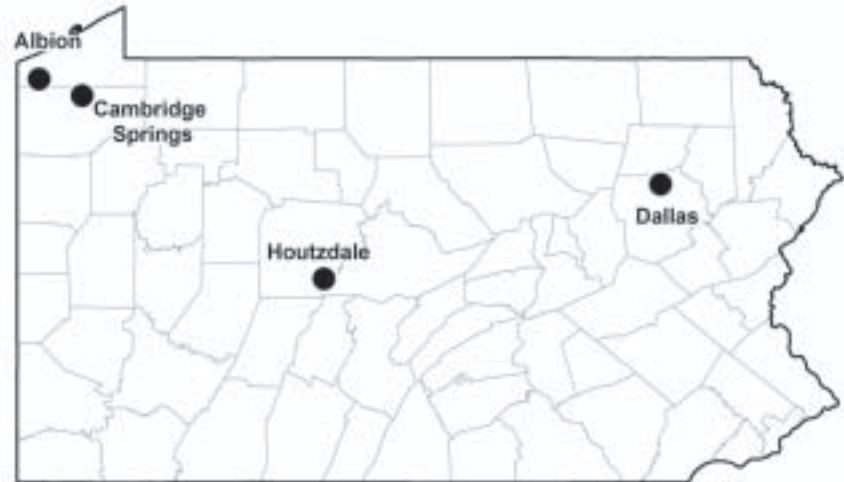
Goals and Methods

The specific goals of the project were to identify problems in the prison-community relationship; identify the extent to which community residents were satisfied with the prison presence in their community; measure the perception of the prisons' economic impact on the local economies; and determine the degree to which the prisons hired locally.

Using the four prison study areas, data were collected from a variety of sources using three different methodologies – a mail survey of local community residents, focus group interviews with selected local government leaders and representatives of local community agencies, and interviews with prison management.

To measure problems in the prison-community relationship and the perception of the economic impact of the prison, the researchers conducted focus group

State Correctional Institutions and Communities Studied



interviews with representatives of community agencies, government officials, and community and business leaders. The researchers also used traditional, semi-structured interviews with prison management including the superintendent of each facility and/or their designees.

To measure community satisfaction, the researchers administered a mail survey to a stratified random sample of more than 13,000 local (community) residents across the four different study areas. The overall survey response rate was 24 percent.

Finally, to determine the degree of local hiring for prisons, the researchers examined the hiring policies and practices of the DOC. This goal was further assessed by interviewing administrators of the SCIs in each of the four geographic areas.

Results

The following section combines the results of all survey methods discussed above.

Prison-Community Relationship

Prison siting

Several issues related to the siting of the prison emerged from the SCI interviews. Administrators at all four sites clearly recognized how the siting process impacted the long-term relationship between the prison and the community. Having the prison near a more metropolitan area was a common desire among the administrators, principally to offer services to employees who may relocate to work at the prison, but also to attract and retain staff, particularly minorities. The administrators often cited the lack of services and amenities typically available within a rural or small community as a reason for the difficulty in attracting staff.

Crime and safety

According to correctional administrators, crime and safety were major concerns at the time of siting for residents of at least two of the communities with recently constructed prisons. Residents were particularly concerned about “camp followers” – people who relocate to the community to be closer to an inmate. Residents were also concerned about the visitors who would come to an area to visit a prison inmate, and about the release or parole of inmates into the local community.

Community focus group members expressed concern about the effects of undesirable visitors to their communities (such as unwelcome behavior and increased crime). These worries ranged from the effect of inmate family and friends spending time in the community to concerns that these individuals may relocate to the community to be close to the inmate.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure issues affected the health of the prison-community relationship. Several administrators mentioned either past or on-going water and/or sewer issues with the surrounding community. This issue was particularly contentious for one SCI. In this case, the community focus group recounted a smooth prison siting process with significant community support and involvement, while, results from the mail survey to community households showed negative feelings toward this SCI on the water and sewer issue. This suggests that ongoing and contentious infrastructure issues can be more important than the (successful) siting of a prison in determining overall community satisfaction.

Improving the prison-community relationship

Several themes emerged in the interviews with the SCI administrators and focus group sessions with community members on how to improve the prison-community relationship.

Improving the siting process

Administrators had specific recommendations about how future prisons should be sited in the commonwealth. Although all of the administrators spoke about the importance of having adequate infrastructure in the local community to support the prison both now and in the future, they also noted the importance of having adequate community services and amenities to attract and retain employees, providing an environment to attract and retain a multicultural workforce, keeping the lines of communication open between the prison and the community, and dealing with visitation issues, such

as prisons should be placed in areas that more easily facilitate inmate visitation.

With one exception, community focus group participants expressed dissatisfaction regarding the perceived lack of communication by DOC with local communities. Participants felt that DOC did not seek input from community members and did not provide an opportunity for formal communication during the siting process. Focus group members believed that much information was spread informally (rumor), which led to increased fear and uncertainty about the new prison.

On a positive note, the participants perceived that the prison would be good for the local economy. Although administrators in two locations spoke about the importance of job creation, and which communities might benefit from it the most, in considering where to place a prison, there was a consensus among the SCI administrators that this should not be the sole or most important variable when considering prison siting. Instead, the SCI administrators thought that the community should have something to offer the DOC and its employees. These findings led to the question, to some extent, of whether prisons should be located in remote rural areas that may lack a diverse and sizable employee pool and adequate infrastructure.

Devoting time to communication

The SCIs in the study attempted to communicate with and reach out to the local community. The extent of this outreach, however, differs among the four prisons and may coincide with the desire for (or reciprocity of) such communication from the surrounding community. Three of the four groups of administrators discussed the desirability and use of a Community Advisory Board, or similar type of board or group, although these boards were no longer active in any of the four locations.¹

Three of the four community focus groups identified the lack of ongoing communication as problematic. In particular, community members expressed interest in learning more about the prisoner release process. Communication was touted as a step toward a better working relationship with local prison administrators, and in establishing and enhancing better relationships between the prison and local officials, police and fire departments, and water and sewer authority personnel.

Relationships with fire departments were the most important to cultivate, according to all four groups of administrators. These on-going and positive relation-

¹ This could be the result of a recent change in the accreditation standards of the American Correctional Association (ACA) whereby such a board no longer appears as a specific standard for successful accreditation of the institution by the ACA.

ships with the local fire departments were established, at least in part, by American Correctional Association accreditation standards mandating regular fire safety inspections of the SCIs.

Administrators differed in the amount of time they devoted to communicating with the local media/press. Some administrators do this regularly, while others did so only occasionally. Most of the administrators believed that more could be done to increase communication with at least certain members of their local communities and to cultivate positive relationships with the local press/media.² Although some SCIs were more involved and committed to communicating with the public than others, all four sites have made efforts to communicate with the public. Similarly, all four sites viewed such on-going communication as important.

Concerns about employees

Some administrators noted the concern of some local residents and police departments about the driving behavior of some SCI staff. This concern was particularly troublesome during shift changes when employees were leaving and entering the prison grounds. Several open-ended comments on the mail surveys also mentioned employee driving habits and/or employee behavior as an issue of concern. Two of the community focus groups expressed a negative perception of DOC employees, specifically citing arrogant/rude attitudes, in addition to attitudes of entitlement shown by employees who appear in uniform in the surrounding community. There was consensus that the public demeanor of DOC employees can greatly influence the type of relationship established and maintained by the prison with the local community.

Safety issues

Overall, residents expressed little concern for safety. However, many residents expressed moderate concern regarding ex-offenders and parolees living in their communities. It may be possible to further reduce community safety concerns through more opportunities for community interaction with the prison, and through more public information regarding prison operations and the prisoner release process. This conclusion also was supported by the fact that prison volunteers who responded to the survey generally felt a greater sense of safety than did those not associated with the prison in this way.

² The household mail survey showed that the prisons generally are not portrayed negatively by regional media.

Public service issues

Concerns in the area of water and sewage varied significantly by prison, with the greatest concern expressed in the two western prison communities studied (SCIs Albion and Cambridge Springs). It appears from focus group and local media reports that water and sewer issues can create long-term negative feelings toward the local prison when these issues are not resolved.

Prison as a neighbor

The prison as a “neighbor” also was assessed in the community survey. Overall, residents in all four communities had overwhelmingly positive feelings about their local prisons as neighbors. While reasons for these positive feelings varied by prison location, residents tended not to feel threatened by the prisons, were pleased with perceived job creation as a result of the prisons, and were positive about the type of community service activities performed by prison inmates. A minority of residents had negative feelings and cited varied reasons, many of which were unique to specific prison sites and may not be generalized to all prisons (such as noise pollution, light pollution, and security concerns).

Economic impact in the local community

According to much of the available literature, at the time prisons are sited and perhaps thereafter, the belief or perception that these institutions will be good for the local economy is evident. Since this perception among residents who responded to the survey was high, particularly in areas that are economically depressed, an examination of this issue is important.

According to the four groups of administrators, the most important economic impact on their local communities was job creation. The perception that the prison would provide the local community with a needed economic boost was also supported by the expectation of new “spin-off” businesses moving into the area as a result of the prison’s presence.

The mail survey assessed the perception of economic impact of the prisons on the local community in terms of local property values, job creation, the prison as a consumer of local goods and services, local tax rates, and the overall economic effect of the prison. The overall finding was that residents were generally positive regarding the prison’s role in the local economy. Many respondents noted that they personally knew one or more prison employees, a circumstance likely to contribute to a positive impression of a prison’s utility as a creator of local jobs. However, it also was evident from

the results that many residents lacked general knowledge about the true impact of the prisons on the local economy. Any economic impact emanating from the prison, whether positive or negative, was not obvious to many community residents. Consequently, the DOC may consider conducting formal economic impact analyses of some of its prisons to confirm these perceptions, improve community acceptance of the prisons, and provide a baseline estimate of economic impact for consideration by potential future site communities.

Two groups of administrators said many of their employees lived in the immediate area and that their presence would undoubtedly have at least some positive impact upon the local economy.

The four community focus groups also agreed that the prisons had generated employment opportunities. However, they also expressed concern that many of the prison employees did not reside near the prisons and that jobs were not always made available to local residents, or that those offered to locals were lower-paying jobs.

All four groups of administrators spoke of trying to make at least some local purchases, such as arts and crafts supplies, botanical supplies, and automotive supplies, but were finding this increasingly difficult because of a change in state purchasing policy that makes it more difficult to purchase from local businesses or vendors. Community focus group members echoed this concern as many were led to believe, at the time of siting, that local businesses would benefit from the prison. Such benefits, however, either did not materialize or were marginal in impact. Further, some group members felt that local businesses were noncompetitive relative to larger retail chains in supplying goods to the prison, especially given the perception that the bid process was designed to control costs.

All four prisons were very active in providing work/labor to their surrounding communities and it was evident among the administrators that this type of community service work was considered important in allowing the DOC to give something back to the community and to be a good neighbor.

Many mail survey respondents mentioned the work that the inmates did in this regard as a positive contribution. The community focus group participants also expressed this point of view.

Hiring Local Residents

At least two groups of administrators believed that the vast majority of their prison employees resided within 15 to 30 miles of the prison. Although there is some

variation among the four locations in the study, this perception was accurate as determined through an analysis of DOC employee residential data. Although no formalized policies specifically require the hiring of local residents, all of the administrators made attempts to hire local residents but were stymied in doing so due to their lack of control over the hiring process, the rural nature of the prison sites with their smaller potential employee population pool, and the “veteran’s preference” policy as mandated by the Military Affairs Act.

Employee dispersion was formally analyzed in the study through the use of employee residential data provided by the DOC. Except in the case of SCI Dallas, average residential distances for employees ranged between 15 to 20 miles from the prison site. This value was smaller in the case of SCI Dallas, likely due to its proximity to the Wilkes-Barre metropolitan area. However, average distances do not tell the whole story. Again with the exception of SCI Dallas, more than one-third (and close to 50 percent for SCI Albion) of employees reside more than 20 miles from the prison site. In terms of economic impact, the dispersion of income and spending by the prison employees can be quite widespread, limiting the economic impact (and multiplier effect) of prison employment on the local community.

Efforts, activities to attract local employees

Attempts at attracting local residents were made primarily through word of mouth, holding job fairs within the local community, using a speakers’ bureau and, at least at one institution, offering high school internships. The belief that there was room for improvement, particularly in recruiting minorities, was also evident among at least two groups of administrators.

Veteran’s preference

It is clear that the biggest impediment to hiring local residents lies in the veteran’s preference policies as mandated by the Military Affairs Act. This system makes it difficult for non-veterans to secure civil and non-civil service positions within the DOC. According to the Military Affairs Act, a potential candidate who is a veteran is entitled to a 10-point advantage on civil service tests. Additionally, a candidate who is a veteran is also given veteran’s preference, which means if a veteran is one of the top three candidates on the list, he/she is automatically selected regardless of ranking. All four groups of administrators voiced their concern with this policy.

Most of the administrators interviewed were frus-

trated over their lack of control over the hiring process. The hiring policies and procedures dictated by the Military Affairs Act not only limits the extent to which local employees (who are not military veterans) can compete for and obtain DOC jobs, but also thwarts administrative attempts to increase and reward the pursuit of education among the DOC workforce.

Policy Considerations

The research results revealed areas for possible improvement in prison-community relations across many areas including prison siting methods, communications issues, public services and infrastructure issues, employee interactions in the host communities, purchasing and procurement policies, and hiring.

Personnel from the State Correctional SCIs should initiate contact with community members to inform them of changes in prison administration.

Specifically, upper-level administrative employees should introduce themselves to the community and local community leaders soon after their arrival. This is particularly important because it is apparent that SCI administrators seldom spend their entire careers at one institution. This communication would be viewed as a goodwill gesture and would help to strengthen communication between the SCI and members of the surrounding area. Recommended methods of communication include contact with local government officials, local civic groups and news media, and updates on institution-specific Web sites.

Prison administrators should implement and actively employ community advisory groups in an effort to enhance ongoing communication between the prison and the local community.

The mission of such groups would be to support ongoing communication and open dialogue between members of the community and the SCI and to dispel myths about the prison held by community members. These groups would be comprised of key figures from the local community, such as township and borough officials, state and/or national governmental officials, local business leaders, and representatives of local and state police, local fire departments, and emergency services organizations. The group would be expected to meet biannually and when joint issues of concern arise between the prison and the community. The American Correctional Association (ACA) recommends a “public

information program that encourages interaction with the public and the media,” but it appears that at least some institutions only marginally abide by this recommendation.

The DOC should consider siting SCIs in areas that have adequate infrastructure and other services, such as schools, local businesses, health care facilities, housing, entertainment, and shopping, sufficient to attract and retain potential employees.

Without such available support services in the area, the prison is less likely to attract potential employees to live in the local prison community. Such a policy may help to reduce the dispersion of prison employee residency and focus the prison's economic impact more directly on the local prison community. Moreover, without such support services, it is difficult to retain minorities as prison employees. Diversifying the DOC work force is important, particularly in view of the characteristics of the prison (inmate) population.

The DOC should consider strategies to permit more purchasing by the SCIs of local equipment and supplies.

During the interviews with prison administrators and focus group participants, a common theme was the expectation of purchases being made from local community resources, which was either implied or frankly stated to local community leaders when the prisons were being sited. This research indicates that to allow more local purchasing, the state's purchasing procedures would need to be modified. This could be accomplished via an increased limit allowable for non-bid items or by specifically allowing the prison's local business manager the discretion to make a limited amount of local purchases. In future sitings, the DOC should make it very clear that the institutions must follow state regulations for purchases and no one should be misled by the implication that local business would get preferential treatment.

At the time of prison siting, a joint committee comprised of representatives from the DOC and the local water/sewer authority should determine the ability of the local water and sewage system to meet the needs of the prison and community.

It is obvious that water and sewage issues place strains on prison-community relationships, especially when prison needs for such services change across time,

placing a greater burden on the host community. The joint committee would determine the extent to which either party is responsible for upgrade costs to the local system to meet changes in capacity. In addition, a written agreement between the DOC and the local water/sewer authority should be created at the time of the prison siting. Any expansion in the prison beyond its originally designed capacity would lead to the implementation of formal mechanisms whereby the DOC would fund an expansion of local water/sewer capacity proportional to the increased demand caused by the prison expansion. These formal mechanisms would designate timelines for a water/sewer expansion study/estimation, local service expansion, and prison capacity expansion. The acknowledgement of such an agreement should ameliorate local concerns regarding present and future impacts of the prison on public services.

Beginning at the time of siting, DOC personnel and persons involved in the siting process should be realistic in their claims regarding the potential economic impact of the prison on the local community.

Claims of economic impact should be based on methodologically sound research. In this sense, the DOC may want to consider conducting or sponsoring a study that would measure adequately the economic contributions of an SCI on its host community. With this data, the DOC could provide future potential host communities with greater specifics on the SCI's economic impact. This would help to avoid unrealistic expectations by community residents. Community members should be told that benefits of siting and hosting a prison may not be excessively remarkable and may take time to develop.

A best practices siting manual should be developed for new prison siting.

Because of variability in the siting process and resulting community-prison relations, a more consistent approach is needed. The manual would be developed with input from superintendents and executive staff who have had experience opening SCIs in various settings. The manual would outline prison siting goals, include desired features of a proposed site, such as adequate infrastructure and area resources, and describe procedures the DOC should follow during prison development and after the prison becomes operational. In the development of this manual, much could be learned by studying instances of successful prison siting not only in Pennsylvania but in other states as well.

Mechanisms should be in place to ensure that employees conduct themselves in a professional manner while in the community.

A consistent theme identified within the focus groups was that DOC employees may disregard local traffic laws and behave in an unprofessional manner in dealing with local law enforcement. Ongoing in-service training regarding the expectation of professional conduct for DOC employees while off the prison campus may be beneficial. Even though there is a code of ethics that addresses employee behavior and conduct outside the prison, this code has been difficult to enforce. The DOC and relevant labor unions are encouraged to develop mutually agreeable enforcement mechanisms related to the employee code of ethics.

The DOC should develop a standard system to annually support (via monetary contributions) local fire departments for fire inspections and fire-related services, including emergency services.

Presently, variability exists in the kind and/or degree of this support. Such support would pay great dividends as a means to improve the prison-community relationship.

Information regarding the parole/release process should be disseminated to local communities. To help alleviate resident concerns, the State Board of Probation and Parole should consider providing release and recidivism (repeat offense) information to community residents at the time of siting and thereafter.

The release procedures policy should be made clear so that community members understand the process. This awareness could help ease residents' safety concerns regarding ex-offenders/parolees in the community.

The local SCI, in coordination with the Pennsylvania Prison Society and/or other social service organizations, may wish to develop a local resources brochure for inmate visitors.

This brochure could contain information on lodging, transportation, food, and other services available in the local community.

The DOC should encourage more volunteerism by community residents.

The results from the community satisfaction survey

indicate that prison volunteers consistently have more positive views of the prison than non-volunteers, especially in the area of perceived safety. The local SCI may accomplish this goal through its prison advisory board or through direct promotion of volunteer opportunities available to local community residents.

The process and policies of hiring DOC employees, particularly those policies related to veteran's preference, should be modified.

Hiring local, non-veteran residents as prison employees is hampered by the commonwealth's Military Affairs Act for both civil and non-civil service positions.

According to the act, eligible veteran candidates who successfully pass Civil Service examinations are entitled to receive 10 additional points and are granted a veteran's preference, which means if a veteran is one of the top three available candidates on the employment listing, he/she is automatically selected regardless of ranking if the vacancy is filled using the Civil Service employment listing. Furthermore, if the top scoring and available veteran candidate is not considered, then the agency is only allowed to first consider other available veterans on the employment list. For certain Civil Service job titles, such as Correction Officer Trainee, this process makes it difficult for non-veterans to secure Civil Service positions with the DOC. Veteran's preference also applies to non-civil service positions.

As an alternative to the veteran's preference, and similar to procedures followed by the Pennsylvania State Police, credit could be granted to applicants who have completed college-level course work and/or have relevant job experience. Particularly in view of the fact that many senior security staff in the DOC move up through the ranks from Corrections Officer (CO), the DOC may want to reconsider the educational requirements of COs who aspire to higher-level positions, such as sergeant, lieutenant, and captain. Such a policy change would encourage local employment and increase education levels among employees in the system while still providing veterans with the 10-point credit they deserve. This approach also promotes the future foundation of professionalism within the DOC.

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