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Getting In (and Staying In) When Everyone Else Wants to Get Out: 10 Lessons Learned from Conducting Research with Inmates

Kathleen Fox, Katheryn Zambrana and Jodi Lane

The current study aims to provide researchers interested in conducting research using inmates with information and recommendations based on our experiences studying jail inmates. While prior research has begun to identify lessons learned about obtaining access to criminal justice agencies and lessons about establishing positive researcher-practitioner relationships during the process, little is known about the specific challenges associated with data collection efforts *after* obtaining access to facilities. Therefore, this article aims to provide researchers with information and recommendations primarily on the issues and challenges of studying inmates after gaining entry to correctional facilities. Ten lessons are offered that highlight a variety of challenges that arise from conducting research with inmate populations.

Although incarcerated inmates are a population of great interest for many criminology and criminal justice researchers, conducting research on inmates presents many challenges. While studying inmates is not an uncommon undertaking, very few published guides exist to assist researchers with preparing for this type of work. This article aims to provide researchers interested in studying inmates with information and recommendations based on our experiences studying jail inmates. In our experience, the information and advice provided here regarding researching jail inmates may also apply to other incarcerated populations (i.e., inmates in prison and juvenile detention centers).¹ Ten lessons are offered that highlight a variety of challenges that could arise from

1. While we have conducted research with individuals incarcerated in jails, prisons, and juvenile detention facilities, we aimed to focus the article by limiting our examples to jail inmates only, given that we studied jail inmates most recently and these experiences tended to be similar to our work with the other inmate populations. We also chose to focus on jail inmates in an effort to maintain consistency throughout the article.

the research with inmates, including obtaining access to correctional agencies, keeping good records, maintaining positive relationships with correctional officers and inmates, understanding the rules of the correctional facility, dealing with low response rates, scheduling and rescheduling data collection procedures, anticipating unexpected situations, understanding the accuracy of inmate self-report data, and maintaining relationships with correctional agencies after data collection. While these lessons may apply to a variety of incarcerated populations, some unique considerations may be necessary when working with prisons (i.e., prison institutional review boards, IRBs) and juvenile detention centers (i.e., parental consent/assent). The current study, therefore, provides a general foundation for researchers studying incarcerated individuals.

Review of Lessons Learned from Prior Research

Prior research has extensively examined incarcerated populations, including inmates in juvenile detention facilities (Lane, Lanza-Kaduce, Frazier, and Bishop 2002; Poole and Regoli 1983) and jails (Peters, Greenbaum, Edens, Carter, and Ortiz 1998; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, and Donaldson 1996; Toch 1992). While a substantial body of research has utilized populations of incarcerated individuals, there are very few published guides designed to assist researchers with the challenges associated with studying inmates. However, some important work offers advice regarding gaining entry into hard-to-access criminal justice organizations (Broadhead and Rist 1976; Jeffords 2007; Lane and Lanza-Kaduce 2007; Megargee 1995; Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings 2004). Prior research primarily focuses on methods of contacting and receiving approval from criminal justice agency "gatekeepers," or individuals who have the authority to permit the researcher to conduct the study (Broadhead and Rist 1976; Jeffords 2007; Trulson et al. 2004). Megargee (1995) provides an important overview of the necessary steps for conducting research with incarcerated samples; however, rather than focusing on the lessons provided in the current study, Megargee (1995) offers suggestions about topics such as formulating research questions, selecting samples, constructing measures, and managing data analysis. Furthermore, Lane and Lanza-Kaduce (2007) describe the lessons they learned while conducting an evaluation of a faith-based program for incarcerated juveniles. A brief review of the lessons learned from prior research is given below.

One valuable lesson focuses on gaining access to conduct research in criminal justice organizations where researchers are currently employed (Clemmer 1940; Goffman 1961; Irwin 1985; Marquart 1986; Sykes 1958). Gaining entry to criminal justice agencies through the researcher's employment within the organization may be a practical approach to conducting research with inmates for several reasons. For example, researchers already employed within a

correctional facility may have developed rapport and trust with key gatekeepers and inmates (Marquart 1986). This approach may result in accelerated access, fewer restrictions and oversight, and may even bolster response rates. While employment is one successful method to gaining access to criminal justice organizations, some researchers explain potential disadvantages of this approach. For example, Broadhead and Rist (1976) caution against using covert methods of collecting data among researchers employed within criminal justice agencies and Marquart (1986) describes some challenges associated with role conflict (correctional officer versus researcher).

Given that many researchers are not employed by correctional agencies, some prior research provides lessons learned about gaining entry as an outsider. Gaining entry to criminal justice agencies is difficult given that organizations are often cautious of outsiders (i.e., researchers) who may expose internal problems that could result in negative publicity and political problems for the agency (Broadhead and Rist 1976). Trulson et al. (2004) identified several helpful steps for obtaining entry to criminal justice organizations, including the importance of securing an established contact who has ties with the agency of interest (i.e., professor), formalizing an official meeting, and behaving in a professional manner (e.g., being on time and dressing appropriately).

Another key lesson provided by prior research involves the importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Given the differences in priorities between researchers and criminal justice practitioners (e.g., conducting research versus performing occupational responsibilities), conflicts may arise that challenge researchers' ideal data collection processes. To facilitate positive interactions and relationships between researchers and practitioners, prior research emphasizes the importance of respect and communication (Gillis, Butler, Bivens, and Rose 2001; Goldstein and Glick 2001; Lane, Turner, and Flores 2004; Reback, Cohen, Freese, and Shoptaw 2002; Riger 2001; Spear and Rawson 2002). Showing respect to practitioners and their priorities often facilitates communication, which, in turn, improves researcher-practitioner relationships and improves data collection efforts (Lane et al. 2004). Establishing respect and communication also facilitates mutual trust between researchers and practitioners (Lane et al. 2004; Reback et al. 2002; Riger 2001).

Collectively, the lessons provided by prior research offer valuable insight for researchers who wish to begin collecting data from hard-to-access criminal justice organizations. While prior research has begun to identify lessons learned about obtaining access to criminal justice agencies and lessons about establishing positive researcher-practitioner relationships during the process, little is known about the specific challenges associated with data collection efforts *after* obtaining access to facilities. Therefore, this article aims to extend the foundational work described above by providing researchers with information and recommendations primarily on the issues and challenges of studying inmates after gaining entry to correctional facilities.

Importance of the Current Study

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance to researchers conducting research with inmates. We present 10 lessons that would have been helpful to us before we begin our own research with inmates. Within the field of criminology and criminal justice, scholars rarely publish what they learn through experience. Instead, researchers rely on seasoned scholars to share information learned about research methods, either through the mentoring process or in methods courses. However, mentoring styles and the content of methods courses vary widely. The overwhelming majority of research methods textbooks at the undergraduate and graduate level provide “traditional” information regarding methods, such as operationalization, ethics, research design, sampling, field research, survey construction, data interpretation, etc. (Hagan 2006; Kumar 2005; Maxfield and Babbie 2008; O’Leary 2005; Pope, Lovell, and Brandl 2001; Schutt 2006). While this type of information is essential for building a foundational understanding for conducting research in general, research methods textbooks do not provide the necessary information for researchers specifically interested in studying incarcerated populations. Furthermore, the related prior research largely focuses on gaining access to criminal justice agencies and does not discuss many of the important issues *after* gaining entry. Given that it is unusual for this information to be written and widely disseminated, this article aims to make these lessons more widely available to scholars interested in conducting new research with inmates. The lessons discussed here pertain to information about obtaining access to correctional agencies, keeping good records, maintaining positive relationships with correctional officers and inmates, understanding the rules of the correctional facility, dealing with low response rates, scheduling and rescheduling data collection procedures, anticipating unexpected situations, understanding the accuracy of inmate self-report data, and maintaining relationships with correctional agencies after data collection.

Methodology of the Inmate Survey: Putting the Lessons in Context

We briefly describe our methodology in an effort to provide readers with a context for the lessons and recommendations that follow. Our research aimed to examine the extent to which gang members perpetrated and were victimized by crime more often than non-gang members. Jail inmates incarcerated in the 20 largest Florida counties comprised the target population.² Permission to conduct the research was obtained from 14 of the 20 jails, which represented 70% of the target population. From October 2008 to January 2009, inmates

2. Given that gang members (NYGC 2007) and crime (Duhart 2000) are more prevalent in urban areas, the sample was derived from the largest counties within the state of Florida in an attempt to obtain a higher rate of gang members, offending, and victimization.

housed in the 14 participating jails were asked by the researchers to complete a survey regarding their experiences with gangs, crime, and victimization. The researchers visited each jail between one and six times to administer surveys to jail inmates.³ All eligible inmates were invited by the researchers to voluntarily and anonymously complete the survey. All of the jails that were visited excluded inmates housed in units for psychiatric disorders, communicable diseases, and disciplinary confinement, and some of the jails excluded federal and high-security inmates. The remaining inmate population within each facility was eligible to participate.

Given that jail inmates have various reading abilities, the survey instrument reflected a basic reading and comprehension level. In an effort to avoid identifying some inmates as functionally illiterate (which may have resulted in negative stigmatization from correctional officers and/or inmates), we did not ask participants or correctional officers about specific inmates' inability to read. Instead, the researchers informed all participants that the survey questions would be read aloud while they responded to each question individually using a "paper and pencil" format. Although the survey was read aloud, participants were given the option to complete the survey at their own pace. Most participants completed the survey on their own while others followed along as the survey was read aloud.⁴ Pencils were provided for the inmates to use to complete the survey and these were collected along with the completed surveys. In an effort to minimize the use of the correctional facilities' time and resources, the survey was administered and collected on the same day by the research team. Based on inmates' individual paces, the survey lasted between 23 minutes and 1 hour and 25 minutes to complete, with an average completion time of 42 minutes. With the exception of one jail that allowed a program coordinator to act as an escort, correctional officers escorted the research team at each facility. As per the request of the researchers, the jail staff rarely remained in the same room while the inmates were taking the survey and did not handle the surveys.

The survey was administered to the inmates in a variety of settings, depending on the preference and procedures of individual jail facilities (e.g., in the recreation area, dayroom, individual cells, and multipurpose rooms). Regardless of the location, attempts were made to space the participants adequately to make sure they did not look at others' survey answers. Ultimately, the research team remained as flexible as possible to accommodate the daily routine of the inmates and staff.

3. In an effort to prevent inmates from participating more than once, each pod was visited on a single occasion and subsequent visits to jails were scheduled as close to the first visit as possible (e.g., most return visits occurred on consecutive days). According to our conversations with jail staff, the possibility for inmates to have moved pods within the short timeframe was determined to be unlikely.

4. Nearly 5% of respondents ($n = 110$ of 2,414) preferred that the entire survey was read aloud as they followed along.

Ten Lessons Learned from Conducting Research with Inmates

Lesson 1: Getting In—Gaining Access to Inmates Takes Time

Obtaining permission to conduct research with incarcerated individuals is a difficult challenge faced by many researchers (Trulson et al. 2004). Some important research suggests practical ways to gain entry into hard-to-access criminal justice agencies (Jeffords 2007; Trulson et al. 2004). We offer additional advice for gaining access to inmates based on our experiences with conducting research in jails. Preparing and gaining permission to conduct research in the jails was, by far, the most time-consuming aspect of the research project and took nearly one year. We recommend that researchers do not underestimate the amount of time that will be necessary to communicate with correctional facilities, create the instrumentation, and obtain approval from university IRBs.

Specifically, we recommend the following sequence of events as a general guide for obtaining access to conduct research with inmates: (1) contact the correctional facility (or a select few targeted facilities) to obtain written consent allowing permission to conduct research, (2) finalize the instrumentation (i.e., survey, interview schedule), (3) obtain permission to conduct research from the university IRB, (4) apply for funding (if applicable), and (5) contact all targeted correctional facilities to gain final approval and entry. While these steps are offered as a general timeline, many of the steps overlap and may occur simultaneously. Following these steps will aid in avoiding unnecessary or time-consuming setbacks. For example, contacting the facility or a small number of facilities before finalizing the instrumentation is important in the (likely) event of being denied access to at least some facilities. It is advisable to gain entry to facilities of interest before spending valuable time perfecting instruments that ultimately cannot be used. In the event that the researcher has a contact person who is acquainted with the gatekeeper, this person may serve as a sponsor who can introduce the researcher and provide a personal recommendation to the gatekeeper (Maxfield and Babbie 2008). Similarly, graduate student principal investigators may wish to request that their faculty advisor make the first contact with the gatekeeper, especially if the advisor personally knows the gatekeeper (see Maxfield and Babbie 2008, for an example letter). Furthermore, gatekeepers may be more willing to approve the research if the survey instrument includes some questions of particular interest to them. Obtaining permission from a few facilities before submitting documentation to the university IRB will facilitate IRB approval, given that the board may be more likely to approve such requests if they are assured that the correctional facilities have approved the study. Furthermore, some correctional facilities require approval from their own IRBs in addition to the university's board approval, which may substantially increase the amount of time necessary to gain access. Next, if funding is requested to support the research, proposals should be submitted with written support from correctional agencies and the university

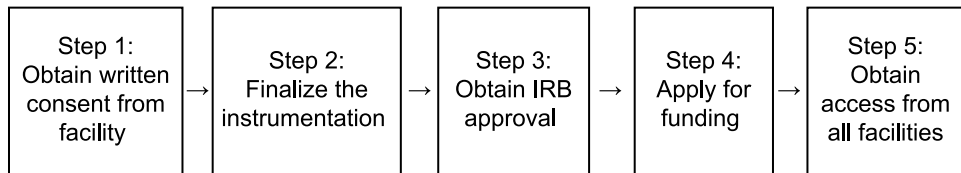


Figure 1 Recommended procedure for gaining access to conduct research with inmates.

IRBs, which will assure reviewers that cooperation has been obtained from gatekeepers. Finally, the remainder of the agencies should be contacted to obtain approval and to schedule the data collection. Figure 1 visually displays the recommended procedure for obtaining access to conduct research in correctional facilities; however, it is important to remember that some steps may co-occur.

While there are many ways to communicate with jail administrators, we recommend initiating communication with phone calls rather than other methods such as mail, fax, or email, etc. Communicating initially via phone has several advantages over the other methods. Phone conversations facilitate more personal familiarity between the researcher and gatekeepers and allow questions and concerns of facility staff to be addressed quickly, which may generate faster approval. Once communication has been established with key personnel, researchers may find it advantageous to inquire about the gatekeepers' preferred method of communication. Initially, communicating via phone is also ideal given that one may not know exactly which gatekeeper must grant permission for the research or, often, the agency is also unsure with whom one must speak. This may be especially true if research has not yet been conducted in the facility. In many cases, it may be necessary to explain the request to several administrators before one reaches the correct person. We used the following introduction to initially explain our request to each person within each jail:

Hi, my name is [name]. I am from [name of university here] and I am working on a research project. I am interested in surveying jail inmates about some of their experiences with crime and being victimized before entering jail. I would not be asking the inmates anything jail-related. I am hoping to talk with you about the possibility of surveying the inmates at your jail.

There will likely be other obstacles that may delay data collection. For example, most of the jails we communicated with ($n = 10$ of 14 jails; 71% of the sample) requested a brief written description of the research project (on university letterhead), a copy of the survey, and the IRB-approved consent form to review before granting final approval.⁵ One jail requested a detailed

5. Considering the procedure recommended in Figure 1, researchers may wish to first contact a few targeted criminal justice agencies before finalizing the instrument and obtaining IRB approval to assess the likelihood of gaining access (see Step 1 of Figure 1). Once preliminary approval has been obtained from a few of the agencies of interest, researchers may wish to finalize the instrument before contacting the remainder of the agencies.

proposal, another facility asked for letters of recommendation from faculty advisors, and yet another required that we submit documentation that released the facility from any liability in the event that we contracted communicable diseases while interacting with inmates. Furthermore, many of the jails required a criminal background check prior to scheduling data collection ($n = 9$ of 14 jails; 64%). While most jails typically informed us of the background approval within two to three weeks, one jail waited over three months to process the background check.

Overall, we cannot overstate the importance of planning to encounter considerable delays while obtaining approval from correctional facilities to conduct research with inmates. Given that this aspect of the research process is extremely time consuming, we recommend avoiding additional setbacks by following the five steps outlined in Figure 1 and communicating with gatekeepers via phone, using a phrase similar to the one provided above.

Lesson 2: Staying In—Maintaining Collegial Relationships with Correctional Officers and Staff is Critical

During the data collection phase, maintaining friendly and respectful relationships with correctional officers and staff, especially those escorting researchers during the data collection process, is critical for successful data collection (Gillis et al. 2001; Goldstein and Glick 2001; Lane et al. 2004; Reback et al. 2002; Riger 2001; Spear and Rawson 2002). As other researchers have suggested, the likability of the researchers will inevitably influence the degree and quality of cooperation from gatekeepers (Dilulio 1987; Trulson et al. 2004). Building and maintaining positive relationships with gatekeepers can be accomplished through a number of simple ways and include being professional and respectful (Lane et al. 2004; Trulson et al. 2004). Professionalism is often achieved by dressing for the occasion (e.g., business or business casual attire), being prepared (e.g., arrive on-time with the necessary materials), and conducting one's self in a friendly yet formal manner (e.g., speak clearly, make eye contact, offer a firm handshake, smile, and do not use slang). Using titles rather than first names (e.g., officer, lieutenant, sergeant) and making requests rather than demands are valuable ways to show correctional officers and staff respect. It is important to keep in mind that the facility and the staff are doing researchers a favor and are typically under no obligation to assist with the research. Furthermore, researchers should not assume that they are more knowledgeable than staff and should respect staff members' priorities and views. For example, it is not a good idea, in many cases, to flaunt one's degrees (e.g., to insist on being called "Dr." in this setting once one has a Ph.D.). Possibly the most important (albeit cliché) advice when maintaining relationships with correctional officers and staff is to never underestimate the power of "please" and "thank you."

One of the most important lessons when maintaining relationships with correctional staff is to recognize that correctional escorts vary widely with

regard to personality, rapport with inmates, and dedication to assist with the research. We worked with many correctional officers who were friendly, welcoming, and overwhelmingly supportive of our research. One officer who consistently worked standard weekday hours even agreed to meet us for data collection on a Saturday. However, we occasionally encountered correctional officers who were suspicious of our work and who impeded the data collection process by distracting the participants (e.g., interrupting inmates who were answering survey questions or shining flashlights in their faces). While the survey was being administered at one facility, a correctional officer entered the room and peered over an inmate's shoulder to look at the survey (after the officer was informed that jail staff could not look at the surveys). We quickly (and politely) lead the officer out of the room and apologized to the participating inmates. However, these situations were rare. The majority of our escorts appeared to have established positive rapport with the inmates, which enhanced our credibility as researchers. We worked with very few escorts who were not well liked or respected by the inmates, and we believed these particular escorts hampered the data collection process by producing anxiety and anger among the participating and non-participating inmates. While all but one jail required a correctional officer to escort the researchers due to safety reasons, other organizations might allow advocates or counselors to serve as escorts, who may be more likely than correctional officers to be trusted by inmates. It may be worthwhile to request escorts who are known to have positive rapport with the inmates as a way to help facilitate the research, but this request might occur after one already has rapport with the gatekeepers so not to raise concerns that researchers are judgmental.

Occasionally, the correctional officers who escorted us throughout the jails were genuinely interested in our research and although some of their behavior was meant to help our data collection efforts, it occasionally hampered our work. For example, while we explained to the escorts that we did not want to coerce any of the inmates into participating, some of the officers would accidentally announce to the inmates (even after being asked not to): "We need volunteers!" In situations such as these, we were quick to announce that participation was voluntary and it did not matter to us or the jail how many people decided to take the survey. On another occasion, an escort asked a group of inmates: "How many people are going to take my survey?" Because it was important that inmates understood that we were not associated with the jail, we immediately, but nicely, corrected the officer by stating that the survey was *ours* and not the *officers'*. Sometimes we found that responding to such issues with respectful humor helped. Additionally, many of the escorts continuously attempted to assist us by physically carrying our boxes of survey materials. Although we understood that the officers were merely being courteous, we insisted they allow us to carry the boxes of survey materials to demonstrate to the inmates that the jail staff never made contact with the surveys. Along these lines, when an officer requested to see a blank survey while we were in view of the inmates, we offered to provide a copy of the

instrument to them at a location outside of inmates' view in order to prevent inmates from believing jail staff were allowed to see survey responses. In an effort to preserve the integrity of our work, we sometimes found it beneficial to explain in a nice way to the correctional officers why some of the behavior impeded our work if this issue arose. Admittedly, many of the challenges we encountered while working with correctional officers would likely have been prevented by a more thorough explanation offered to correctional officers prior to data collection procedures.

Overall, the majority of the correctional officers and staff we encountered were supportive of, and even interested in learning more about, our research. We worked with many officers who were highly efficient and many others who were not in a particular hurry to accomplish research-related tasks. Regardless of the efficiency of the escort, it is important to understand that *everything* that occurs within correctional facilities—from obtaining a day pass to waiting for meal time to end—takes more time than researchers often anticipate. Ultimately, scholars conducting research using inmates will benefit by budgeting additional time for data collection procedures. In general, establishing and maintaining positive relationships with correctional officers and staff (achieved, in part, by being professional and respectful) eliminates many problems during data collection. Conducting research in correctional settings can create potential problems and challenges beyond those presented by correctional officers and staff, chief among them is maintaining positive relationships with inmates.

Lesson 3: Getting What You Came for—Maintaining Positive Relationships with Inmates during Data Collection

In addition to working with correctional officers, working with inmates also presents interesting challenges for researchers. One important lesson we learned when interacting with inmates involved our degree of friendliness. On one extreme, we wished to be as friendly and inviting as possible in order to encourage inmates to feel comfortable participating in our research, while on the other extreme we wanted to maintain distance to convey assertiveness and professionalism. We communicated a comfortable level of friendliness that was somewhere in between these two extremes wherein we smiled and even joked with inmates while maintaining direct eye contact and remaining in control of the data collection procedures. We treated everyone we encountered with respect and, in turn, we were respected.

We often built rapport with inmates by discussing the success of the sports teams from our large southeastern university or by discussing the upcoming sporting events from the universities near each facility we visited. We also found that using humor was a simple and non-threatening way to interact with inmates. For example, when inmates asked us if we were afraid to be surrounded by so many criminals we smiled and responded sarcastically that we

were "terrified." Although we were generally comfortable with the inmates, we chose not to provide them with many personal details. For example, inmates occasionally asked personal questions regarding the type of fragrance we wore or our home address. While these questions were relatively rare, we informed overly inquisitive inmates that we "plead the fifth" to any questions we did not want to answer. Gaining the respect of the inmates is important for safety (e.g., the researchers and the correctional officers will likely be exponentially outnumbered by the inmates) and to encourage inmates to feel comfortable participating in the research. Building rapport with the inmates and treating them for the most part as regular civilians allowed the data collection procedures to run more smoothly.

Another important lesson we learned involved effective ways to maintain positive relationships with groups of inmates who participated in our research. First, we learned that we could generally control male groups of any size (the largest group of men to participate during one session was 38 participants) because they were not usually disruptive. In contrast, female groups of more than approximately 20 participants were difficult to control in terms of minimizing their talking during the survey administration. Second, the environment in which we administered the survey also influenced the extent to which we were able to effectively maintain positive relationships with inmates. We administered our survey in groups, and participants privately and individually responded to the items while either following along as the survey was read aloud or continuing at a faster pace. The survey was typically administered either inside the pod (where the participants were at tables and the non-participants remained in the pod) or outside the pod in a multipurpose or attorney room (where participants were transferred to and from by our escort or another correctional officer). Both locations presented unique advantages and disadvantages. For example, conducting research inside the pod was advantageous in terms of eliminating time necessary to locate, prepare, and transfer inmates to and from an available multipurpose room. Relocating inmates was often an extremely time-consuming disadvantage associated with administering the survey outside of the pod. However, administering the survey inside the pod involved supervising non-participants in addition to participants, whereas conducting research outside of the pod offered a substantially higher level of privacy and quietness for participants. We discovered that non-participating inmates were curious about the content of the survey as well as the responses of their fellow participating inmates. Moving inmates into another room, although time consuming, allowed for less distractions that led to more controlled and focused groups and resulted in faster survey completion for inmates. In order to preserve anonymity and maintain a comfortable environment for participants, conducting research in the pod necessitated announcements from the correctional officers and from the research team warning non-participants to avoid approaching the survey administration area.

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned about maintaining positive relationships with inmates was the value of having a research assistant to

accompany and assist with all aspects of the data collection procedures. The research assistant accompanied the team on visits to every jail to collect data, which required very early mornings, long drives, overnight stays, late hours, and exhausting days. In addition to translating the survey instrument into Spanish, the research assistant also administered the Spanish survey to inmates. While the principal investigator read the English survey aloud to groups of participants, the research assistant read the Spanish survey to groups of Spanish-speaking participants in a separate location. This facilitated a substantially higher response rate among Hispanics, which was important given the high number of Hispanic inmates in many of the jail populations that we visited.⁶ When not administering the Spanish version of the survey, the research assistant was also responsible for maintaining order (e.g., minimizing talking among participants), keeping record of important details (e.g., start and stop times, number of participants, any questions inmates asked), and helping participants who could not read by administering the survey one-on-one or by pointing to specific survey questions as they were read aloud by the principal investigator. The research assistant should know the instrument well, and the research team should regularly discuss possible questions or concerns that could arise while interacting with the inmates. Research assistants who are well trained are better suited to interact with inmates without over relying on the principal researcher.

The research assistant also helped with administering and collecting surveys and pencils from groups of participating inmates, which were seemingly simple tasks that proved to require high organizational skills and keen attention to detail. While we expected that many inmates would attempt to keep the pencils we provided them with to take the survey, we did not anticipate some of the creative methods with which several inmates employed in this regard. When we requested the pencils from inmates who did not initially return them with their survey, we were most commonly told that they simply forgot to return their pencil along with the survey. On other occasions, we witnessed inmates hiding pencils in their pockets or in the bindings of their books. Once, an inmate broke the golf pencil and attempted to return only the unsharpened half. We determined that the most effective way of easily obtaining the pencils was to announce at the beginning of the survey administration that all pencils must be returned along with the surveys and that pencils would be provided to all participants (even those that already had writing utensils) in order to keep track of materials. This was especially important given the possible use of pencils as weapons once the surveys were completed. While the jails did not consider pencils to be a threat to safety, many of the correctional officers appeared to be concerned about safety and preferred that we conscientiously collect the writing utensils from participants. Overall, organization was key for implementing a standard method for distributing and collecting all materials.

6. Nine percent of respondents ($n = 212$) chose to complete the Spanish version.

Lesson 4: Avoiding Getting Kicked Out—It is Important to Know the Facility's Rules

Correctional agencies are known for having strict rules and regulations for inmates, correctional officers, and visitors. Researchers entering these facilities are not exempted from abiding by the rules. We strongly recommend that researchers ask about the rules in advance of the scheduled data collection. Often, there are no exceptions to rules and each facility is likely to have a unique set of policies and procedures. In terms of dress, many of the jails we visited had similar standards (e.g., close-toed shoes, no low-cut shirts, no visible midriffs). For men, we recommend wearing comfortable shoes, little or no jewelry (except a wrist watch), full-length slacks with pockets (no jeans), a pressed collared shirt, and dressing in layers to remain comfortable in a variety of temperatures. In addition to the recommendations for men, we suggest women also avoid wearing tight or revealing clothing. If permitted, we recommend bringing a water bottle and throat lozenges (which were helpful given the amount of talking necessary) and cash (cafeterias located inside correctional facilities often only accepted this method of payment). None of the jails we visited permitted cell phones or other electronic devices to enter the facility, and some of the jails required that car keys be kept at the front desk. Additionally, we were required to pass through metal detectors at most of the jails, and we quickly learned that this process was faster if we brought in as few items as possible (such as belts and jewelry). It is also important to remember that while in the jail, if an incident occurs, researchers must immediately follow the orders of the correctional staff.

Lesson 5: Before, During, and After Data Collection—Detailed Record Keeping is Essential

Keeping detailed records of all project-related information before, during, and after data collection is critical for several reasons. Especially for research involving more than one site, keeping track of all facility-specific information will help with keeping the data organized (to avoid confusing facility information). Furthermore, researchers will most certainly find themselves referring to their records numerous times while writing final reports. We recommend creating physical, electronic, and email files as depositories for all communication and documentation received from each facility. Each researcher (including research assistants) should be responsible for documenting information at all phases of the research process, and duplicate information can later be consolidated. Before gaining access to conduct research within multiple facilities, it is important to create a log (preferably matching electronic and printed copies) of (1) the facilities that were contacted; (2) the name, rank, and position of the contact person; (3) the phone number of the contact; (4) the date and time of the communication; (5) the important information discussed during the

communication; and (6) the status of the request. When awaiting approval to access facilities, this file should remain with the researchers at all times. It will be necessary to regularly refer to the file and update the information when gatekeepers happen to return calls.

Once access has been granted, but before data collection begins, we strongly recommend scheduling a meeting with gatekeepers and, most importantly, with the escorts who will be accompanying researchers throughout the facility (i.e., correctional officers or administrators). This meeting, which should be arranged as close as possible to the date of data collection, is important for facilitating smooth data collection procedures for several reasons. First, it is important to discuss the details of the data collection procedures during this preliminary meeting, including how the escort will call the attention of inmates, how researchers will describe the study to inmates, where volunteers will participate and how they will be transferred to designated areas before and after participation, how materials will be administered and collected, the anticipated number of days the data collection process will take, and any requests for the escort (i.e., requests not to handle the instruments or to discuss the content of the survey/interview questions).

Second, this meeting should include a discussion of any daily routines of the facility that may interfere with data collection (i.e., shift changes, meal times, lockdowns, head count, visitation, movie showings, and recreation). Third, during the meeting, researchers may wish to ask for copies of the facility's floor plan (or recreate the floor plan based on administrators' descriptions in the event that actual floor plans are not provided) and identify the type of inmates housed within each pod such as the daily population, gender of inmates, primary language spoken,⁷ security level, type of supervision (direct versus indirect), and physical lay-out (e.g., podular, dormitory, or linear).⁸ Identify specific types of inmates that researchers prefer to exclude from the study (possibly inmates with communicable diseases) as well as the housing units and types of inmates that the jail deems ineligible for participation (e.g., inmates in lockdown, disciplinary solitary confinement, maximum security, or inmate workers).

Furthermore, it is important to discuss the type of security offered by the facility for the protection of the research team. Protection procedures designed to safeguard us from inmates varied with each jail's standard procedures. Only one jail provided an electronic radio (called a "man down beeper"). Some jails agreed to allow us to conduct the study with a correctional officer close by, but not present in the room, while other jails required officers to be present during the survey administration. Regardless of the arrangement, to the best of our knowledge, jail staff were unable to see the inmates' survey responses. Finally,

7. Depending on the number of inmates who do not speak English, it may be necessary to translate and administer the instrument in other languages.

8. Podular housing incorporates separation between bed areas, dormitory housing is often described as open bay with many bunk-beds in open area, and linear housing is comprised of a row of dormitories separated by a hallway (see visual examples in Beck 1999).

during this meeting it is important to make note of specific terms used by administrators to refer to the facility and clarify this language as needed. For example, each correctional facility may have unique terms, such as “floors,” “wings,” “units,” “pods,” “hard cells,” etc. Identifying and learning the vocabulary of the particular correctional facility one operates within will reduce the possibility of future confusion and will facilitate data collection procedures.

During the data collection process, it is also vital to maintain organized and detailed records. Researchers should anticipate the information that will be important during the writing phase of the research project and ensure systematic collection of such data. For example, it is wise to document start and stop times of data collection, the population count within each pod, the response rate, any disruptions or situations that may influence the number of participants or the nature of responses, questions or problems understanding specific survey items or skip patterns, and any information learned from conversations with correctional officers, administrators, or inmates. Given that our survey was administered to inmates in English and Spanish, we kept record of the number of both versions used within each pod. Similarly, we documented the number of inmates that followed along as the survey questions and response options were read aloud versus the number of participants who chose to take the survey on their own at a faster pace. Bringing a spreadsheet containing these specific categories (and others of interest) to each data collection session assists with organization. When in doubt, researchers should *document and save everything*; information can always be discarded or disregarded later. Keeping data organized during the collection process will aid later during analysis and interpretation of findings.

After data collection, while preparing for the writing phase, researchers will inevitably have questions they regretted not asking during the data collection phase. For this reason, and others (discussed later), it may be beneficial to remain in communication with key individuals at each facility after data collection. Correctional officers and administrators have access to a wealth of information (both official and unofficial data) and are often willing and able to share privileged information when asked. By taking extra time to build relationships with correctional staff, we learned valuable information about jails, staff, and inmate life. While a more thorough discussion of the importance of maintaining relationships with staff is discussed later (see Lesson 10), we conclude this section by emphasizing the value of maintaining information obtained before, during, and after data collection.

Lesson 6: Anticipate Low Response Rates

Given that sample size is dependent upon the willingness of individuals to volunteer to participate, research comprised of inmate samples often results in comparatively low response rates (e.g., Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996). Consistent with prior research using inmate samples, the majority of inmates in our

research either actively or passively (by not responding to our request) refused participation. Although the response rate for each pod varied between 0% and 93%, we achieved an average rate of participation of 25%. In order to interpret response rates of incarcerated populations, it is important to understand the correctional setting. For example, while it may be possible to obtain the population size of each pod/housing unit (in our experience the typical population per pod was between 60 and 100 inmates), this rarely reflects the true number of inmates who hear the invitation to participate in the study. Even if the inmates are quieted during the announcement made about the research, some inmates may not be able to hear the announcement due to their location (e.g., cells, beds, recreation room, or showers) and other inmates may choose not to pay attention by ignoring the announcement or by refusing to remove their headphones.

Determining the response rate by counting the number of inmates who are believed to be listening to the announcement, rather than the total number of inmates in attendance, presents other methodological limitations. For example, inmates may be hidden from the view of the researchers but may still be able to hear the announcement. Similarly, some inmates who initially appear to be asleep may be awake and may or may not choose to participate. Therefore, we argue that the response rate for each pod should be calculated based on the total number of inmates present in the pod (not necessarily only the inmates researchers determine have paid attention to the announcement). Ultimately, calculating the response rate based on the entire number of inmates present during the time of the survey announcement results in a conservative estimation of the response rate.

Certain sampling procedures may facilitate a higher or lower response rate among inmates based on the ease of accepting or declining participation. For example, procedures that easily allow inmates to passively decline participation (e.g., by asking interested parties to congregate in a specific area to then be moved to a location suitable to administer the survey) will be more likely to result in lower response rates (e.g., our research generated an average response rate of 25%). Alternatively, procedures that require inmates to relocate to a designated survey room and then ask for their cooperation and participation are likely to generate higher participation rates (see Peterson, Braiker, and Polich 1981). Similarly, conducting research among inmates already congregated for other purposes may yield higher response rates (e.g., educational courses, religious services). While some researchers have obtained higher response rates by relocating inmates before asking them to participate (e.g., Peterson et al. obtained a 57% response rate), we believe this approach should be used with caution given the possibility for inmates to feel coerced into participating. Inmates may be coerced into participating because the majority (or all) of the other inmates remain in the room and because inmates understand that a correctional officer will be required to escort them out of the room. Inmates may participate in the research in order to avoid additional contact with the officer (especially if the officer would not otherwise be called to the room or if

the inmate did not want the officer to know s/he was not complying with the request to participate). To counter this concern, inmates may be instructed at the outset that if they prefer not to participate they may sit quietly during survey administration and leave when the survey participants are dismissed.

Although no data were systematically collected regarding contextual factors that affected response rates, we took observational notes in an effort to understand the lower response rate generated by our sampling procedure. The response rate within each pod appeared to be affected by several identifiable factors, including time of day, officer rapport with inmates, and interference with daily activities. For example, fewer inmates were awake in the early mornings and, therefore, conducting the survey in the mornings generated consistently lower response rates than administering the survey after lunch time. Furthermore, it became apparent that in some cases the escort may have affected the response rate based on his/her degree of rapport with the inmates (see also Lesson 2). More specifically, escorts with less rapport with inmates generated lower participation rates. Moreover, conducting the survey in pods during scheduled activities resulted in lower response rates. Inmates were unlikely to volunteer to participate if they anticipated needing to leave for visitation, to meet with their attorney, for an infirmary appointment, or for physical recreation, etc. The response rate was also reduced if the inmates believed that participation would interfere with scheduled meals, although this was only an issue in the event that participants left the pod to take the survey in a separate room. Alternatively, the response rate increased when the survey interfered with scheduled lockdowns. Inmates on lockdown (confined to their cells) were more likely to participate when given the opportunity to leave their cells to complete the survey versus staying on lockdown. Indeed, many of the challenges associated with conducting research with inmates are unavoidable; however, some anticipated problems can be mitigated. For example, had we known these lessons prior to data collection, we would have made every effort to schedule data collection during the afternoons (after the inmates finished lunch) and request to work with escorts known for having more rapport with inmates.

Our response rate was not affected by inmates who agreed to participate and then withdrew from the study. Only one participant among over 2,000 participants requested that we discard their responses because they were uncomfortable with the survey. Instead, some participants and non-participants were concerned that their admission about engaging in particular crimes could incriminate themselves. Although we assured inmates of anonymity by asking respondents not to provide their name or inmate number, a few inmates suggested that we might be able to match their responses to their fingerprints on the survey. We responded to this suggestion by reminding inmates that we were not affiliated with law enforcement and we did not have the money, time, or motivation necessary for such an elaborate investigation. Overall, low response rates are common for research comprised of inmate samples.

Lesson 7: Scheduling and Rescheduling—Researcher Flexibility is Necessary

Given that correctional facilities largely operate around many scheduled routines (e.g., shift changes, lockdown, head count, meal time, visitation, exercise), we encountered daily threats to our data collection plans. Some of the most important lessons we learned regarding scheduling mishaps were to expect setbacks, wait patiently, and create new plans. We were frequently asked to reschedule visits to jails due to scheduling conflicts that arose for our escorts and these requests resulted in a time-consuming domino effect involving a series of cancelations (i.e., research assistance, rental car, hotel reservations). On one occasion we traveled nearly three hours to collect data at a jail and after two hours of waiting we were finally told that our contact did not report to work that day because of an illness. While we were eventually paired with another escort, we lost hours of valuable data collection time. At another jail, we were instructed to meet staff at an administration building to process our identification badges before traveling to the nearby jail to begin data collection. While processing the badges took a small amount of time, we were instructed to wait nearly three hours before the administrators were ready to escort us to the jail. Because staff may not be aware of researchers' time restrictions (especially if conducting research involves traveling from a far distance), it is important to talk with the staff about scheduling expectations prior to arriving.

Scheduling mishaps are also very common once data collection has begun. We discovered that a plan to enter a specific pod could be postponed due to a variety of reasons. Sometimes, our visit coincided with unscheduled lockdowns or other scheduled meetings (religious services, alcoholics anonymous, narcotics anonymous, commissary distribution, etc.). Additionally, we sometimes discovered that the person who approved the study (a colonel, captain, or major) did not communicate with the correctional officers and staff about our research. As we entered each pod to collect data, our escort needed to spend time introducing us and explaining our purpose to the supervising officer on duty. At times it was necessary to administer the survey in multipurpose rooms, and in many cases we were prevented from proceeding with the data collection procedures when the rooms were in use (i.e., religious services, educational classes, meetings with attorneys). On one occasion, a physical altercation between inmates prevented us from entering the last pod on the last day of data collection at one jail, which resulted in a subsequent trip to the facility (including a six-hour drive) to administer the survey to a single pod (a 45-minute session).

In short, conducting research within correctional facilities inevitably results in frequent scheduling changes and researchers must be ready to patiently and willingly adapt. Some recommendations to reduce threats to scheduling include: (1) confirming data collection dates and times a day or so before the visit; (2) requesting that the person who has approved the study sends a memo to all correctional officers and staff members announcing the purpose and the date(s)

of the visit⁹; and (3) obtaining a list of scheduled activities that take place in multipurpose rooms needed for data collection purposes. While scheduled plans are sure to change frequently, it is important to remember the value of patience and flexibility.

Lesson 8: Anticipate the Unexpected

Similar to the lesson learned about the importance of anticipating schedule changes (Lesson 7), conducting research in correctional facilities requires anticipating unexpected and unplanned situations. Here, we briefly identify several issues experienced during our research with inmates. While these situations are not intended to be exhaustive of the possible circumstances that may be encountered, we provide a brief discussion in hopes of informing and preparing researchers for several potentially unexpected experiences.

First, we were somewhat surprised to observe that the vast majority of inmates treated us with respect and courtesy. In fact, several inmates initiated a formal handshake at the conclusion of the survey, which we accepted (reluctantly, at times, given our concerns about sanitation and safety). Furthermore, very few inmates attempted to profess their innocence and many openly discussed the nature of their incarceration and the extent of their criminal behaviors. However, we were not exempt from being the occasional targets of profane language, inappropriate comments, and masturbation. We determined that the best course of action for such situations was to ignore the behavior from inmates who were not participating in the research (who were typically further from us) and to request that the behavior desist from participants (who were in closer proximity). Additionally, few inmates asked us for favors (e.g., requests to call family members), which we firmly declined.

Second, we encountered very few participants who appeared not to take the survey seriously. Nearly all of the inmates who agreed to participate in our research followed our instructions and relatively quietly responded to survey items. While the vast majority of participants were easy to work with, we came across some inmates who misbehaved during the survey administration. Talking to fellow participants during the administration of the survey was the most common form of misconduct, and these infractions were typically resolved by making eye contact, moving closer, or making announcements to request participants avoid talking to their neighbors. We asked only one pair of extremely disruptive participants to terminate their participation prematurely and leave the administration room. In that situation, we determined that the two inmates were not only disrupting the surrounding participants, but they also appeared

9. In an effort to protect the time of your contact person, we suggest offering to write a sample memo that the contact person can easily modify and send to staff members. The memo should include brief mention of the information described in the informed consent (i.e., name, contact information, purpose of the research, general topic of the questions, length of time anticipated, and the date(s) of schedule data collection).

not to be taking the survey seriously. Along these lines, we recommend excluding data collected from individuals who clearly appear to be providing inaccurate responses. Our survey contained several intrinsic check points which allowed us to verify consistent responses across similar items.

Finally, we were presented with a variety of situations that a realistic amount of anticipation could not have prepared us to handle. For example, during one visit an inmate suddenly began violently convulsing and experienced what appeared to be a seizure. Although a team of correctional officers quickly carried the man out of the pod, the commotion irreparably excited the participants so we quickly gathered our materials and moved out of the room until the situation was cleared. On another occasion, an elderly participant submitted her survey and began crying uncontrollably while explaining to us that she had endured years of physical abuse from her husband who had her arrested for the first time on a domestic violence charge (which she described her behavior as self-defense). During another jail visit, our escort accompanied us inside a pod and before we could make our announcement about the research an inmate began frantically screaming so loudly that the correctional officers decided to remove him from the pod. On yet another occasion, one of us saw a childhood friend incarcerated in one of the pods. We informed the escort that we personally knew one of the inmates who wished to participate in our study. Given the unpredictable nature of interacting with inmates, researchers collecting data within correctional facilities will inevitably face unique problems and issues. Perhaps the most effective advice beyond recommending anticipation of unexpected events is to react to uncomfortable situations in the most professional and least dramatic way possible.

Lesson 9: Take Precautions to Help Ensure Inmates Feel Safe Reporting the Truth

While using self-report survey data is a common method for ascertaining the extent to which individuals have perpetrated crime (i.e., National Survey on Drug Use and Health and the Monitoring the Future Survey) or been victimized by crime (i.e., National Crime Victimization Survey and the National Violence against Women Survey), it is important to address the potential for respondents to be inaccurate or untruthful and therefore bias the results. Given the problems associated with official statistics (i.e., unreported crime, little detail surrounding the offense), self-report surveys have generated a wealth of information beyond the capacity of official data (Maxfield and Babbie 2008). However, the validity of self-report data relies upon respondents' willingness to provide truthful information. When asked about personal (and perhaps incriminating) experiences with crime perpetration and victimization, respondents may fail to provide accurate information by underreporting or over-reporting for a variety of reasons. Respondents may accidentally underreport their experiences due to memory decay, telescoping, or misunderstanding the events or legal

definitions (Levine 1976; Singer 1979). Furthermore, respondents may purposefully underreport their involvement in crime or victimization due to embarrassment or fear of stigmatization, punishment, or even legal ramifications based on their admissions of criminal offending and/or victimization (Harrison 1995). The issue of over-reporting crime or victimization may also plague self-report survey data for many of the same accidental reasons (telescoping, misunderstanding events, etc.) and intentional reasons (over-reporting seriousness of crime for sympathy or for a feeling of importance or power) (Levine 1976).

Although self-report data have been criticized, some research has documented the accuracy of self-report data (Harrison 1995). Research based on self-report survey data on crime and victimization, from incarcerated samples in particular, presents additional considerations regarding the accuracy of responses. Jail inmates have been officially accused of having committed crime (and many have been sentenced for criminal behavior). Some may even be classified as "career criminals" who have repeatedly recidivated. Therefore, samples based on offenders may not necessarily be characterized by society as truthful or reliable data sources. However, using self-report survey data from known offenders may be one of the most valid and accurate methods of obtaining information on crime perpetration and victimization for several reasons (Thornberry and Krohn 2000). First, prior research suggests that incarcerated individuals provide accurate data about their criminal histories (Peterson et al. 1981). Second, certain methodological procedures have been shown to generate more accuracy such as promising anonymity by refusing to collect identifiers (name, inmate number, etc.) and asking inmates to indicate responses privately rather than verbally (Turner, Lessler, and Devore 1992). Third, there are often no rewards or punishments for inmates to falsify their answers by indicating more socially desirable responses.

We employed certain techniques that other research suggests generate success in soliciting more accurate survey data, such as offering anonymity and asking respondents to privately respond to survey questions rather than responding verbally to interviewers (Harrison 1995; Turner et al. 1992). Consequently, we recommend: (1) assuring anonymity by declining to collect inmate names (e.g., on survey materials or informed consent forms), (2) limiting the contact jail staff have with the survey materials, and (3) allowing respondents to complete the surveys in private while being adequately spaced apart from one another. Therefore, possibilities for inmates to be publically embarrassed about or proud of their perpetration or victimization experiences were reduced given these procedures.

Lesson 10: Getting Out—Leave on Good Terms

Once data collection is complete, it is advantageous to continue to maintain positive relationships with administrators and gatekeepers. As mentioned earlier, one will likely have additional questions during the writing phase of the

research project; therefore, we recommend keeping in touch (or at least on good terms) with administrators and escorts after the conclusion of the data collection. We advise sending personalized thank you letters (typed on university letterhead) to the people who assisted with gaining access and data collection as well as to their supervisors (i.e., captains or sheriffs). Often, these letters will be placed in employee files and may even be considered for future assignments or promotions. Other methods of maintaining relationships with criminal justice organizations include acknowledging influential gatekeepers or escorts in written reports, offering to send a summary of the findings, and sending copies of future publications that utilize data collected at their facility (Goldstein and Glick 2001; Lane et al. 2004; Reback et al. 2002). We mailed a brief summary report of the study and findings to each of the participating jails and all of the jails within the state of Florida. This not only aids researchers in gathering information later but also sets a positive precedent in the jail facilities for future researchers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide researchers interested in collecting data from incarcerated populations with information and advice about the lessons we learned or had emphasized recently when collecting data specifically from jail inmates. Although research with inmates involves a tremendous amount of preparation and many researchers over the years have done important research in this area, there are very few practical guides. We hope this article provides researchers who wish to begin studying inmates with helpful and practical information regarding obtaining access to correctional agencies, keeping good records, maintaining positive relationships with correctional officers and inmates, understanding the rules of the correctional facility, dealing with low response rates, scheduling and rescheduling data collection procedures, anticipating unexpected situations, understanding the accuracy of inmate self-report data, and maintaining relationships with correctional agencies after data collection. The information and recommendations outlined here are likely applicable to studying inmates in a variety of settings. Therefore, while we provided experiences and advice specifically about conducting research with jail inmates, researchers who wish to study any incarcerated population may also find this information useful.

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