

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

---

**The Benefits of  
County Jail Inmate Work Programs**

---

**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

---

**By  
Santiago Ortiz**

**Comal County Sheriff Office  
New Braunfels, Texas  
September 2007**

## **ABSTRACT**

The inmate population in most counties is growing and the cost of housing them is increasing even faster. By introducing an inmate work program, the cost to the taxpayer and the county can be reduced. Subsequently, research has demonstrated that an inmate work program, using inmate manpower, is one way to ease some of the problems related to the expenses involved in supporting inmates. This study is designed to generate feedback from various sized Texas sheriff's offices regarding their experiences with an inmate work program. Counties that were surveyed shared the concept that an established inmate work program had a positive effect in helping inmates not to become re-offenders. The inmate work program has offered multiple benefits to the county budget, county jail, and the communities that have implemented these programs. This research suggests that inmates who are involved in an inmate work program can develop many positive skills that can enhance and ultimately change their lives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction. ....	1
Review of Literature .....	2
Methodology .....	5
Findings .....	5
Discussions/Conclusions .....	9
References .....	11

## INTRODUCTION

County jails are facing an all time high in inmate population. The problem of housing inmates is growing faster than some counties can handle. One of the ways to help ease this problem is the implementation of an inmate work program. The success of these programs can reduce the crimes while inmates are incarcerated as well as when they are released.

This research will present the problem of a growing population of inmates that is a source of concern to local sheriff's offices and all governmental agencies that house them. According to the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (2004/2005), "the incarceration rate of county jail inmates doubled in 1999" (p.6). Of the 254 counties in Texas, 239 operate at least one jail; 30 counties are constructing new jail facilities, and 37 other counties are considering building new facilities.

The question to be considered examines how an inmate work program can help manage increasing inmate populations. This research anticipates demonstrating that these inmates are learning valuable skills. If or when they are released, they will have acquired certain employable skills and knowledge and hopefully use these skills to find work and help them become constructive citizens of society. Such efforts provide a concrete alternative to the "lock'em up and throw away the key" mentality. Interviews with jail administrators will be conducted providing resource information to services and costs, the pros and cons of having such a program, and identify who will ultimately profit from the inmate work program.

Additionally, established research data will be obtained through published information sources. Research and primary sources for information regarding this project will be obtained through interviews and surveys with other jails that already have established an inmate work program.

The intended outcome of this research is to demonstrate that most counties that house jail inmates can benefit by instituting an inmate work program. Additionally, by putting an inmate work program in place, crimes and abuse of inmate on inmate can be decreased in the jails. The benefit to law enforcement will result in having fewer numbers of inmates becoming re-offenders, therefore having more money and personnel available for use in other areas where needed. The communities will benefit through a relief in tax dollar usage when re-offenders decrease in numbers through the positive effects of the inmate work program.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Is there an advantage to having an inmate work program in a county jail? These programs consist of various numbers of inmates that volunteer and are approved to be a part of a work detail for the facility and county for which they are incarcerated. Trustee selection is based on the individual inmates past criminal history, current criminal charges, as well as their demeanor and behavior while incarcerated. If eligible through the court or sheriff's approval, and with a satisfactory performance, inmate work program participants may receive two days for one credit on their sentence.

The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure Art 42.032 Sec.2 Good Conduct states:

The sheriff in charge of each county jail may grant commutation of time for good conduct industry, and obedience. A deduction not to exceed one day for each day of the original sentence actually served may be made for the term or terms of sentences if a charge of misconduct has not been sustained against the defendant. (p.359)

There are several influential individuals who have been strong supporters of the inmate work programs. One major supporter was, Chief Justice Warren Burger; his personal dedication to improving America's correctional systems is a hallmark for everyone in the corrections profession. He advocated the intense use of industry programs in our nation's prisons to combat and alleviate inmate idleness, while preparing inmates for productive careers upon release. Chief Justice Burger was a tireless advocate of prisons industries. His service as co-chairman of the National Prison Industries Task Force transformed work and rehabilitation programs for inmates into meaningful and effective resources. He was convinced that the keys to successful correctional programs were "education, job training, and employment (Burger, 1974, p.1)."

With regard to a non-profit organization work crew, inmate work crews complete various projects and tasks for non-profit organizations within the county, as well as for the county itself. A few examples of these projects include; miscellaneous work crews, automotive cleaning crews, recycling center crews,

road trash pick up crews, city library helpers, lawn crews that maintain the grounds of the sheriff's office, and county owned lots and property.

Designated officers strictly supervise these inmates during work on all projects. The focus of these programs is to establish or re-establish non-violent offenders into the work force. These offenders may have had gainful employment prior to their incarceration and possessed marketable job skills. The programs are also beneficial to those offenders who have families that rely on them for financial support, by giving them skills and trades they may use when seeking employment when they are released from incarceration.

Utilizing inmates in the work program will save the county and the taxpayers money. This occurs in two ways, first by performing tasks outside the jail and around the county, which would have cost the county money otherwise, and secondly, the practice of the inmates earning two for one credit for time saves money by decreasing the actual time the inmate is housed in the county facility. Indeed, the majority of Americans support inmate labor because they believe that prisoners should help offset some of the costs of incarceration. According to Atkinson & Rostad (2003), it costs \$40 billion annually to incarcerate prisoners in federal, state and local prisons, which calculates as approximately \$20,000 a year per prisoner. According to the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (2004/2005), "some of the county jail conditions are approaching the crisis stage due to rising inmate populations, causing an increase of medical cost, staffing and retention problems" (p. 6). Surely inmates can work and contribute something to help pay for this so that the local

government and taxpayers do not have to be completely responsible for this financial burden.

As important as it is to save tax dollars, the real benefits are that the incarcerated individuals are receiving some necessary job skills and training, while instilling in the workers with a feeling of confidence and self worth. The long-range goals of these programs are to help make the inmates transition into the community a more successful one, as well as to decrease the chances of the individuals to re-offend.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is designed to receive feedback from Texas county sheriff's offices of different sizes regarding their experiences with an inmate work program. The representative group of Texas county sheriff's offices will be randomly selected from the Texas Commission on Jail Standards Jail Population Report, (2000, p.1-9). Telephone calls will be made to the selected offices explaining the aim and objectives of the research and inviting individuals to participate in the research. These facilities will then be sent (via fax) a questionnaire or called and verbally asked the questions from the questionnaire. Of the county facilities contacted, 80% responded and provided information or available information.

## **FINDINGS**

It was discovered, during the research, that all of the counties that responded had an inmate work program. All had reported jail inmate populations from 232 inmates to 1187 inmates in custody and reported that they are not



privately operated. The State of Texas is facing an all time high in inmate population with one positive effect being the inmate work program. Comal County Sheriff, James R. "Bob" Holder implemented this program in 1997. Instead of allowing inmates to lie around the jail and be supported by tax dollars, the sheriff devised a plan to let them help clean up our community. Sheriff Holder researched inmate work programs and checked with various state agencies to insure that all was done in a correct and legal way (Holder, 2006). The program was started with no money, equipment, tools, or staff. The inmates work in different areas of the county and the jail Monday through Fridays, eight hours per day, five days per week, and when needed on Saturdays. According to the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, inmates should not be required to work more than 48 hours per week except in an emergency, Chapter 289 Rule 289.3. Inmates sentenced to Comal County are screened and selected for outside work assignments and are assigned and supervised by Comal County correctional staff.

As an example, this plan has brought multiple benefits to the Comal County budget, county jail and the community in general. Inmates are assigned to work this program by the courts as a condition of their fines. They earn \$50.00 per day credit if they choose to work, versus the \$25.00 per day they receive if they do not participate in the program.

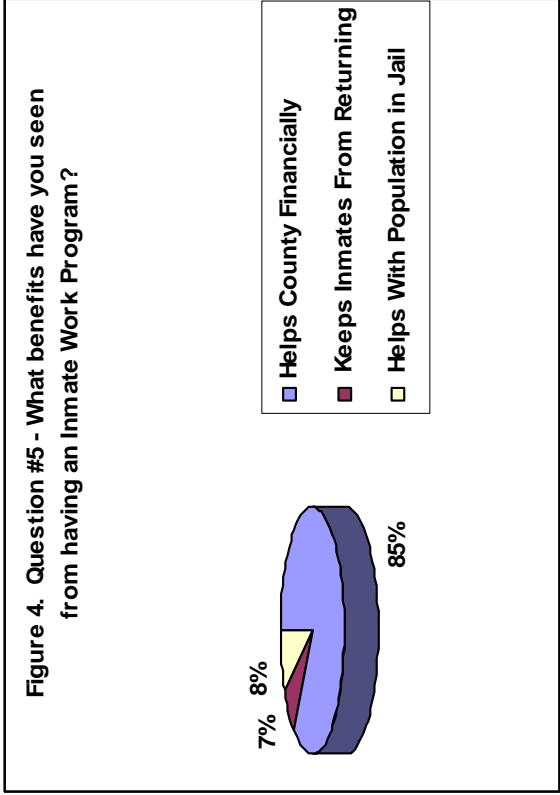
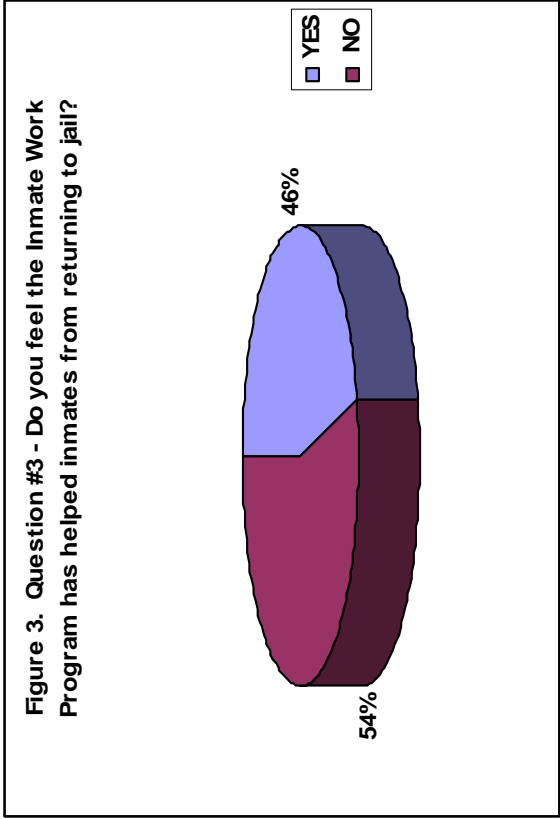
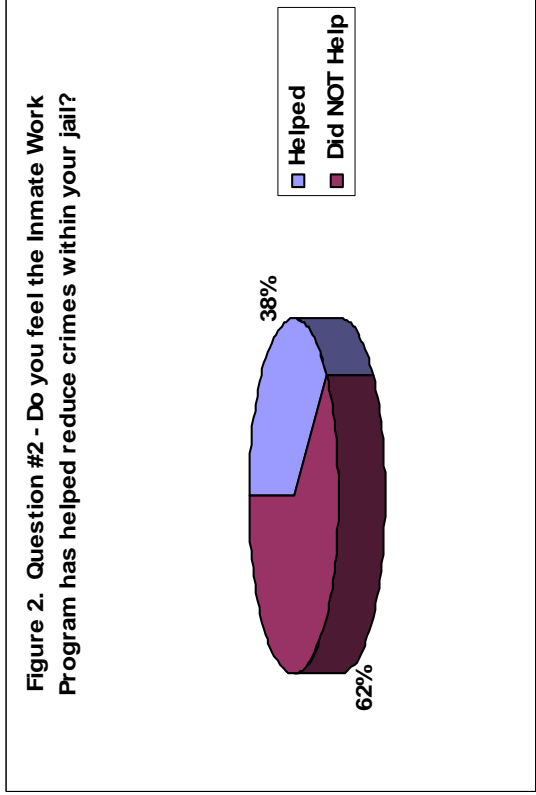
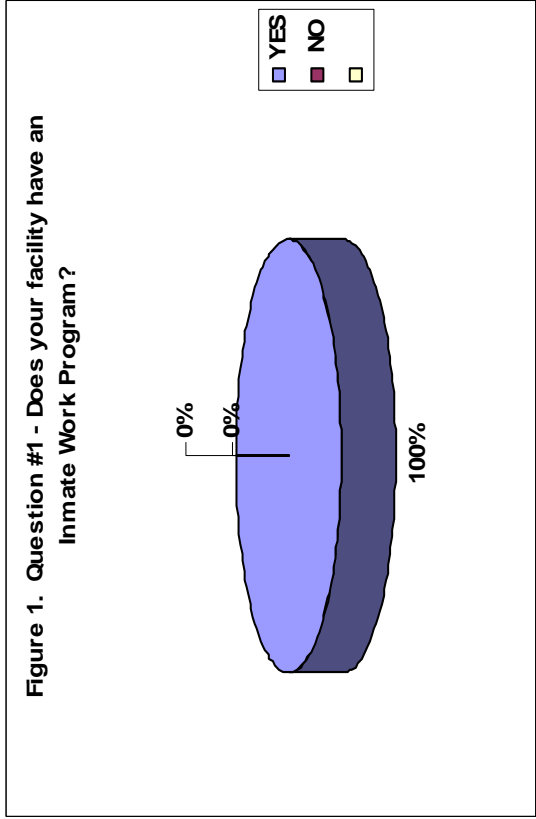
Inmates may work at the Comal County Recycling Center, do yard and landscaping work at the jail, do various types of painting, keep the warehouse clean, and numerous other jobs at the jail and throughout the county.

The Comal County auditor states that the savings to the county is approximately \$56,238 annually. This number is based on 6 inmates working 5 days per week, 7 hours per day at a rate of \$5.15 per hour.

6 inmates X 42 hours (7 hours each)X 5 days per week = 210 man hours weekly
210 hours X 52 weeks per year = 10,920 hours per year
10,920 X \$5.15 per hour = \$ 56,238.00 per year in savings to the county

The size of the counties surveyed ranged from the largest (with an inmate capacity of 1187 inmates), to the smallest (with an inmate capacity of 232 inmates). Out of the 27 counties that were sent survey questionnaires, 13 counties responded.

The findings of this survey were largely similar county by county. Nine out of 13 (62%) of the counties reported no reduction in crime in their jails due to having an inmate work program, versus the 5 out of 13 (38%) of the counties that stated it did help in reducing crime in their jails. (See Figure 2. Question #2)



Seven out of 13 (38%) counties stated that they felt the inmate work program did not prevent inmates from re-offending as compared with 6 out of 13 (46%) counties that felt it had a positive effect in preventing inmates from re-offending. (See Figure 3. Question #3)

All (100%) of the counties surveyed had an inmate work program in effect at their jail. (See Figure 1. Question #1)

Eleven out of 13 counties (85%) stated that the greatest benefit to having an inmate work program came in the area of financial benefits to the county. Seven percent felt the greatest benefit came in helping inmates from returning to jail and 8 % felt the greatest benefit came in helping with population control in the jail. (See Figure 4. Question #5)

Question #4 is not applicable, as all facilities have a program in place.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

County jails are facing an all time high in inmate population. Statistics indicate that the problem of housing inmates is growing faster than some counties can handle. The source of concern with the increasing inmate population is that the costs of inmate care services are rising at a rapid rate. As mentioned previously, Texas is experiencing an enormous jail population problem. At present, taxpayers and individual jurisdiction cover the direct cost of running the jail system, as well as such indirect cost as the maintenance of an inmate with unlimited health care benefits, and legal services. In effect, inmates are guaranteed an all-expense paid stay at the taxpayer's expense. Today the

jail population represents a huge pool of unused labor that simply drains county and state money, rather than contributing to it.

How can an inmate work program help manage the increase of inmate populations? To address this problem, the findings of this study suggest that utilizing inmates in the work program will save the county and the tax payers money. The state of Texas now has an opportunity to embrace the inmate work program as a way of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. The results of the research show how costly it is to house inmates in a jail and that having an inmate work program, as opposed to not having an inmate work program, can result in saving a large amount of money for the county, as well to taxpayers. The benefit of this research to the law enforcement community is one possible solution to help offset the budgeting impact of inmates cost and release fewer re-offenders back onto the streets. Using an inmate work program as an economic strategy will also result in more money that will be available for use in other needed areas.

## REFERENCES

Atkinson, R., & Rostad, K. A. (2003). *Can inmates become an integral part of the u.s. workforce?* New York: New York University Law School.

*Urban institute reentry roundtable, employment dimensions of reentry:*

*Understanding the nexus between prisoner reentry and work,*

May 19-20, 2003.

Cikins, W.I. (1996). *Warren burger's quest for "factories without fences"*.

Retrieved on September 15, 2006, from

<http://www.unicor.gov/about/organization/history/dedication.cfm>

Renken, D. Auditor, Comal County, Texas. (2006).

*Comal County 2006 Adopted Budget.*

Texas Commission on Jail Standards. (2006, October). Texas Commission on Jail Standards Population Report, 1-9.

Texas Commission on Jail Standards Work Assignments.

Chapter 289, Rule 289.3.

Texas Criminal and Traffic Law Manual. (2005-2006). *Good conduct.*

Code of Criminal Procedure. Art. 42.032, p. 359.