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*On Good Authority* is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice. This report was written by staff Research Analyst Karen Levy McCanna. It is a summary of a program evaluation of the Illinois Department of Corrections' gang-free environment program at the Taylorville Correctional Center. The evaluation was conducted by Laura A. Gransky and Ernest L. Cowles of the Center for Legal Studies, University of Illinois at Springfield. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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## Making a prison gang-free: the Taylorville Correctional Center

Prison gangs pose a variety of management problems for correctional administrators. As an active criminal subculture, prison gangs perpetuate criminal activity, threaten other inmates, and challenge administrators for control of facilities. The Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) initiated a plan in 1996 to establish a gang-free environment at the Taylorville Correctional Center as an alternative for inmates without gang affiliation.

This report is a summary of a five-month evaluation of the Taylorville program undertaken by researchers at the University of Illinois at Springfield. At the request of IDOC, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority funded the evaluation in 1998 using federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act funds.

### Evaluation approaches

Three approaches were utilized to obtain a portrait of the gang-free environment at the Taylorville Correctional Center:

- An in-depth study of the correctional center environment;
- A comparison of Taylorville with three other minimum-security facilities; and
- The collection of staff and inmate opinions and system-level data.

Interviews, surveys, and focus groups were used with staff and inmates from Taylorville and the three comparison sites. In addition, information was collected from IDOC's Offender Tracking System and other institutional documentation.

### Mission

Upon being selected as the gang-free site, staff at Taylorville developed a mission statement containing the key elements relevant to the gang-free concept:

- 1) Establish a gang-free environment;
- 2) Provide safe, secure, and humane living and working conditions for inmates and staff; and
- 3) Assist these offenders in making lifestyle changes.

The controls central to achieving and maintaining the elements identified in the mission statement include:

- Control the internal sources of gang power by eliminating gang structures and gang activity;
- Control the external sources of gang power by controlling contraband; and
- Control gang affiliation by effecting changes in the individual inmate's decision-making process.

### The transition

The transition to a gang-free environment took place over the weekend of Dec. 6-8,

1996. Inmates eligible to be housed in Taylorville's gang-free environment included Taylorville inmates and transfers from other minimum-security facilities. To be eligible, inmates had to claim no gang affiliation, memberships, or association, and meet minimum-security prison requirements. During the December 1996 weekend, 657 inmates were received at Taylorville and 552 were transferred from Taylorville to other minimum-security facilities.

Transforming Taylorville into a gang-free environment facility meant overcoming obstacles. The greatest obstacle was a time limitation: less than 4 months from decision to implementation. The immediacy of implementing this program caused a number of issues to surface with the new inmate population that could not be dealt with expediently.

For example, many inmates in educational programs at their original institutions believed the same opportunities existed at Taylorville. In the cases

The number of inmate disciplinary reports filed has decreased during the post-conversion time period. Similarly, inmate grievances have decreased and good-time revocations have dropped.

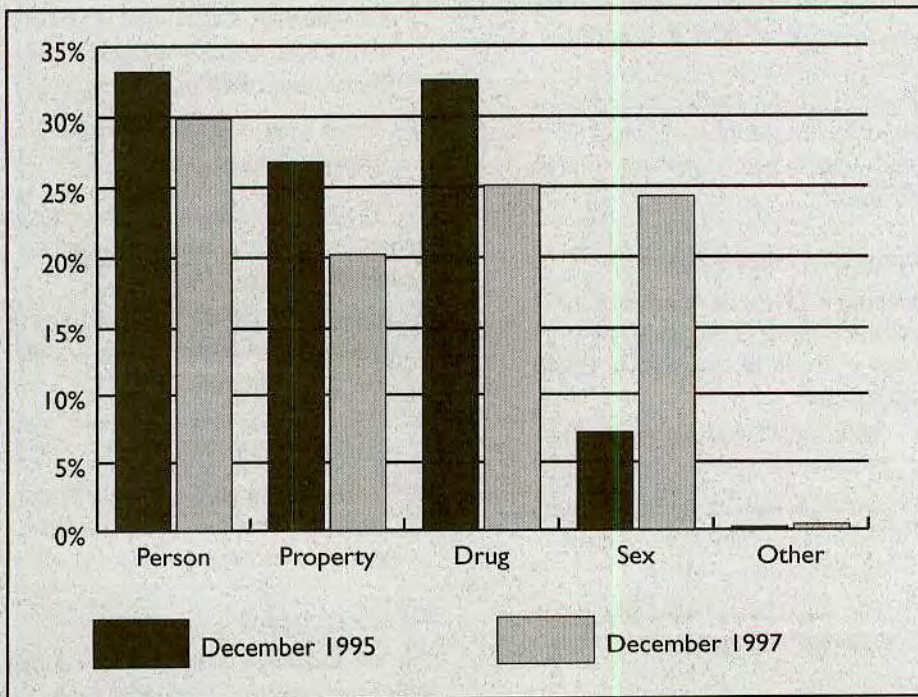
where this was untrue, frustrations surfaced among inmates and correctional center staff. Other difficulties included a resistance to change and a general wariness among staff of attempting a new anti-gang prison strategy.

Significant changes in the population at the Taylorville Correctional Center followed the transition to a gang-free environment. **Figure 1** illustrates the sentencing offenses of Taylorville inmates after the transition. Inmates housed at the correctional

center after the conversion were generally older and had more medical conditions and mental health problems. They also were more articulate, but complained more about small issues. The concentration of Caucasians, sex offenders, and inmates wanting to enter into special programs, such as substance abuse treatment or vocational classes, also increased considerably.

Transfer to the Taylorville Correctional Center became voluntary in May 1997. Since then, Taylorville staff have been screening recently sentenced inmates at two IDOC adult reception and classification (R&C) centers. The process involves an initial review by R&C personnel and screening by Taylorville staff who travel to the R&C sites to conduct a more intensive selection process aimed at identifying gang affiliation.

**Figure 1**  
Taylorville Correctional Center  
inmate population by offense type



### Assessing program operations

Evaluators assessed program operations on three levels:

- A review of operational indicators;
- A review of programmatic changes; and
- A review of the results from the focus groups, inmate surveys, staff surveys, and interviews.

Operational indicators included inmate disciplinary reports filed, the number of inmate grievances reviewed, and the amount of good time revoked (days revoked or grade reduction) for a period prior to and after the conversion. The number of inmate disciplinary reports filed has decreased during the post-conversion time period. Similarly,

inmate grievances have decreased and good-time revocations have dropped.

Programmatic changes centered on the introduction of the Lifestyle Redirection program at Taylorville. Lifestyle Redirection is designed to provide inmates with insights and opportunities for self-improvement that can be incorporated into everyday living. **Figure 2** provides a look at the topics encountered by inmates who reach the third and final level of this program. Other program changes include an increase in drug treatment slots and the reinstatement of an evening tutoring program.

Inmates from Taylorville and the three comparison facilities completed 356 surveys. The surveys addressed issues regarding sense of personal safety, security, well-being, and health and services utilization. Survey responses indicated that safety issues did not differ between inmates at Taylorville and the three comparison sites, other than in the identification of gang members. Privacy issues differed significantly only by race. Caucasians were more likely than non-Caucasians to respond that there was very little or no privacy in their housing units. There were no significant differences found between facilities for the personal well-being and program participation questions.

Inmate focus groups also were held and revealed differences in perceptions between inmates who had been transferred to Taylorville in December 1996 and those inmates who were sent to Taylorville directly from the R&C centers. Overall, inmates entering from the R&C centers held a more positive view toward the gang-free environment. Inmates transferred from other facilities felt they had been misled about the type and number of programs available at the correctional center following the conversion to a gang-free environment. There was a widespread consensus that Taylorville was a safe facility.

Surveys also were completed by 112 staff members from Taylorville and the three comparison sites. The staff at Taylorville generally exhibited positive attitudes about working in the gang-free

environment while the staff at the comparison sites expressed negative opinions about the Taylorville Correctional Center. Researchers felt this negative perception was due to a lack of understanding and awareness about what Taylorville had achieved.

Other significant differences were revealed when staff perceptions were compared. For example, the number of

inmate disciplinary reports written at the comparison sites reportedly increased after the conversion, while Taylorville's number decreased. Taylorville staff reported the prison environment as much safer for non-gang members than did their counterparts. Finally, the Taylorville staff were more positive about their jobs than the staff at the comparison sites.

**Figure 2**  
Lifestyle Redirection topics

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
Self esteem	Examines personal belief and value systems.
Victims	Identifies victims and addresses victims' issues.
Setting boundaries	Addresses the differences of personal boundaries and identifies issues surrounding aggressive versus assertive behavior.
Men's roles	Examines issues of male dominance.
Anger symptoms	Addresses issues of immaturity and provides examples of appropriate coping skills.
Dealing with anger	Addresses anger management and appropriate behaviors for dealing with and expressing anger.
Violence triggers	Identification of violence with lessons on violence and "acting like a man."
Domestic violence	Identifies and examines the cycle of violence.
Healthy relationships I	Examines the issues surrounding a healthy sexual relationship versus sexual abuse, and deviant sexual relationships.
Healthy relationships II	Addresses personal childhood experiences and their contribution to sexual behavior as an adult.
Wellness	Teaches healthy lifestyle habits such as nutrition, exercise, and smoking cessation.
Trauma	Identifies and examines physical and emotional trauma, reactions to trauma, and recovery from trauma.

## Recommendations

Some programming changes are being considered, including an expansion of the Lifestyle Redirection program and the initiation of a Flag Droppers program. The Flag Droppers program would provide an opportunity for inmates who want to renounce their gang affiliation to do so without fear of retaliation by being housed in the gang-free environment. Inmates with past gang history but no current involvement could also be housed at Taylorville.

To maintain safe housing, designated minimum- and medium-security housing would be utilized to separate Flag Droppers participants from other Taylorville residents.

The evaluators made several recommendations for the implementation of these efforts:

- 1) IDOC should ensure appropriate commitment of time and resources

to the development of a Flag Droppers program.

- 2) A Flag Droppers program could endanger the ability of the institution to maintain its gang-free environment.
- 3) Without proper support and buy-in from both inmates and staff for the Flag Droppers program, the ability of the Taylorville Correctional Center to provide safe and secure conditions could be jeopardized.
- 4) The evaluation team recommended that the gang-free steering committee, which assisted with the initial transition, be reconvened before a Flag Droppers program is implemented.
- 5) The expansion of Lifestyle Redirection may negatively affect the environment's ability to assist inmates in making lifestyle changes.

- 6) Turnover of Lifestyle Redirection staff may result in different program outcomes among inmate cohorts.
- 7) A growing program waiting list will pressure Lifestyle Redirection staff to expand their services, and mandating participation in the program is likely to cause conflict with some inmates.

The evaluation revealed that Taylorville successfully implemented a program that parallels its institutional mission. The correctional center seeks to provide a gang-free environment that is safe and secure; has humane living and working conditions; and where inmates can make lifestyle changes. To varying degrees, the institution has been successful in this effort. ♦

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