



Vernon Parish ExtraLegal Needs Assessment:

A survey of the demographics and social
service needs of adult criminal defendants
appointed representation by the 30th JDC
Public Defenders' Office and incarcerated
at Vernon Parish Jail



This study was funded by a grant from the Community Partnership Panel (CPP) – Central Region
of the Louisiana Bar Foundation, with support from the Louisiana Public Defender Board

“Without education, job skills, and other basic services, offenders are likely to repeat the same steps that brought them to jail in the first place ... This is a problem that needs to be addressed head-on. We cannot say we are doing everything we can to keep our communities and our families safe if we are not addressing the high rate at which offenders are becoming repeat criminals.”

-- Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, March 28, 2011

The Louisiana Justice Coalition (LJC) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to protect the constitutional right to counsel and ensure the respect and dignity of each practitioner and every client by improving the delivery of public defense services and creating a receptive climate for positive change.

This study was funded by a grant from the Community Partnership Panel (CPP) – Central Region of the Louisiana Bar Foundation, with support from the Louisiana Public Defender Board.

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VERNON PARISH NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

A SURVEY OF THE DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIAL SERVICE NEEDS OF ADULT CRIMINAL DEFENDANTS APPOINTED REPRESENTATION BY THE 30TH JDC PUBLIC DEFENDERS' OFFICE AND INCARCERATED AT VERNON PARISH JAIL (MARCH 22-23, 2011)

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INTRODUCTION

The ExtraLegal Needs Assessment is the compiled data from interviews with 43 pre-trial indigent defendants who were appointed representation by the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office and incarcerated at Vernon Parish Jail (Leesville, LA) on the interview dates of March 22-23, 2011. Interviews were conducted by staff from the Louisiana Justice Coalition, Louisiana Public Defender Board and 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office. All interviews were voluntary. Interviews were conducted with full support from the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office and cooperation from law enforcement and jail personnel at the Vernon Parish Jail. The study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- To create a profile of clients in Vernon Parish based on their race, gender, income, age and criminal history;

- To assess the needs of the Vernon Parish Jail population based on clients' self-reported history of learning disabilities, mental illness, addiction, homelessness, incarceration, family life and employment.
- To record the scope and diversity of treatment options and alternatives to incarceration that clients are interested to receive;
- To document the effect of incarceration on the lives of clients, their families, support systems and immediate communities; and
- To identify trends in the collective experience of indigent defendants who are being represented by a public defender.

A study of this kind is important and relevant for several reasons:

First, Louisiana has the highest rate of incarceration of any state in the nationⁱ. Louisiana's incarceration rate is significantly higher than the nation's state with the second highest incarceration rate (Mississippi, as of 2007). The United States has the highest rate of incarceration among industrialized nations.ⁱⁱ Louisiana has held this distinction for a number of years, and has a prison population that continues to rise faster than the national average. In January 2008, Louisiana had more than 106,600 people in state prisons or parish jails.ⁱⁱⁱ In January 2009, the National Institute of Corrections reported that Louisiana's incarceration rate was 44% higher than the national average, despite having only a 14% higher crime rate.^{iv} Additionally, Louisiana seems reluctant to employ probation as a sentencing option, with a rate of probationers per 100,000 that is 39% lower than the national average.^v

Second, with so many people in jail and expenditures related to incarceration increasing, the costs of prisons in Louisiana make up an increasing percentage of the State budget. In 2007, \$552 million—7.5% of the State's total general fund expenditures—went towards corrections.^{vi} State dollars spent on incarceration take money from other state programs, including education, health care and State infrastructure. When investments in social services face cuts, more and more people begin slip through the cracks of safety nets designed to support the homeless, the unemployed, and those suffering from mental and physical disabilities.

Third, a growing body of evidence from both practitioners and academics has affirmed the link between unmet social needs and crime.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Data collected in this study supports the presence of a relationship between crime and unmet social needs. This research reveals that the vast majority of pre-trial prisoners awaiting trial in jail are suffering from at least one kind of crisis, be it a crisis in housing, addiction, employment, or mental or physical health. The issues identified by this survey include:

1. **Homelessness:** 28% of interviewed prisoners reported being homeless at least once in their lives.
2. **Addiction:** 35% of interviewed prisoners reported being addicted to drugs or alcohol.
3. **Mental Illness:** 35% of interviewed prisoners reported being diagnosed with a mental illness or personality disorder.
4. **Abuse:** 34% of interviewed prisoners reported incidents (singular or repeated) of physical abuse. Of these, 47% of interviewed prisoners required medical attention for injuries sustained through this abuse. 21% of interviewed prisoners reported incidents (singular or repeated) incidents of sexual abuse.
5. **Foster care:** 23% of interviewed prisoners reported having been in the foster care system as a child.
6. **Educational attainment and special education:** 40% of interviewed prisoners reported that they did not complete high school. 33% of interviewed prisoners reported being in special education classes. 16% of interviewed prisoners had some college education or a college or graduate-level degree.
7. **Employment:** 49% of interviewed prisoners reported that they were working at the time of arrest; 37% of interviewed prisoners were employed at a full-time position.
8. **Family situation:** 58% of interviewed prisoners had children (57% of male prisoners and 63% of women prisoners).
9. **Prior experience in jail:** 77% of interviewed prisoners had been incarcerated on previous charges. 44% of interviewed prisoners reported that they had been previously represented by the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office.
10. **A Local Problem:** 40% of interviewed prisoners had lived in Vernon Parish all their lives. 14% of interviewed prisoners had lived in Vernon Parish for less than one year; and 16% of interviewed prisoners have never lived in Vernon Parish.

The fundamental conclusion of this study is that there are significant social service needs among clients of the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office, as well as significant client requests for treatment, and client opinions about the most effective treatment options.

Appropriate facilitation to needed social services through a social worker/social services coordinator employed by the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office could improve court outcomes for clients, maximize the mitigation resources for public defenders, create a broader range of sentencing options to be considered by criminal court agencies and provide more effective advocacy for the improvement of the entire Vernon Parish community.

ABOUT THE REPORT

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive list of prisoners in the Vernon Parish Jail was obtained from the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office, who then identified all clients represented by their office. In the month before the interview, the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office communicated with all criminal justice stakeholders about the purpose and logistics of the study. A week before the interviews, all 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office clients were given a one-page description of the study. Every prisoner was asked to participate. Every willing prisoner was interviewed. No effort was made to interview 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office clients who had bonded out of jail or been released. No prisoners who were represented by retained counsel were interviewed.

The majority of interviews were conducted within the Vernon Parish Sheriff's Office, which is one floor below the Vernon Parish Jail, though a limited number of interviews were conducted in the Vernon Parish Jail. All interviewers were trained by the LJC Administrator before conducting interviews. There were 5 interviewers. All interviews took place in a confidential room (though the room may have been shared with another interviewer and prisoner).

In all interviews, LJC used a standardized questionnaire consisting more than 200 closed and open-ended questions. The average duration of each interview was 40-45 minutes. LJC staff used some discretion in following the precise language and order of the questionnaire. No verification of prisoner reported information was conducted.

LJC attempted to interview every prisoner in Vernon Parish Jail during the interview dates. Participation in this research was voluntary, and 35 defendants declined to participate in this study. No willing prisoner was intentionally refused an interview. Prisoners signed a consent form to participate in the interview and release the information they had shared at the conclusion of the interview in an anonymous format.

For the purpose of this study, LJC acted as an agent of the 30th JDC Vernon Public Defenders' Office, with the permission of the District Defender, and all information collected in these interviews was passed to the defendant's attorney and is therefore protected, confidential work product of the Vernon Public Defenders' Office. There are no copies of information collected in the interview.

GOAL

The ultimate goal of this research work is to protect the constitutional right to counsel and implement a comprehensive defense model that empowers public defenders to provide high quality representation to each of their clients. This advocacy makes a broader range of options available to defendants and the criminal justice system, saves tax dollars, protects public safety and restores community health.

ABOUT A COMPREHENSIVE DEFENSE MODEL

Louisiana jails have increasingly become the centers of communities, housing individuals who have been unable to get the assistance that they need to avoid becoming court-involved, and processing

large numbers of residents within particular communities. The first step for transforming the approach of public defense and related criminal justice agencies is to gain an increased appreciation for, and sensitivity to, the extralegal needs of incarcerated clients.

An individual's first contact with the criminal justice system offers a public defender a rare moment in which to assess many of that individual's most salient needs, including those that lie outside of the immediate realm of the legal system.

Comprehensive defense seeks to replace the probability of re-incarceration with effective alternatives achieved through a strong collaboration between community service providers and the Public Defenders' Office. The presence of social workers/social service coordinators in the public defender office – integrated as part of the defense team – can address the social service needs of select clients so that they do not cycle back and forth through the criminal justice system. By aggressively addressing unmet social service needs, the comprehensive defense model increases public safety and decreases criminal justice costs while supporting individuals and their families to become healthy members of the community.

The Louisiana Public Defender Act of 2007 – both the Act itself and the increased education of policy makers and increasingly sophisticated public dialogue on criminal justice issues that led to its passage – creates a tremendous opportunity finally to create a high-quality public defense system in Louisiana.

LJC believes that quality defense mandates a comprehensive defense model in which public defenders are committed to achieving better outcomes for their clients and work collaboratively with social workers/social service coordinators and social service providers. Towards this end LJC will work with the District Defender and criminal justice stakeholders to undertake research, implement effective solutions, evaluate success and promote policy changes.

Social workers/social service coordinators in the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office would increase community justice by contextualizing crime against underlying social service issues, and serving as a liaison to programs, treatment opportunities and non-criminal justice support that give clients the best opportunities to ensure that their current contact with the criminal justice system will also be their last.

“Certainly, we have a population in our jail that would be better served not in our jail. There are sufferers of mental illness or addiction (who) have done something criminal to land them there but they may not be career criminals. I would be very in favor of any program or effort that would address problems that would keep people out of jail.”

*-- Caddo Parish Sheriff Steven Prator
Shreveport Times, July 30, 2008*

THE BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE, COMMUNITY ORIENTED DEFENDER NETWORK

The Community Oriented Defender (COD) Network is a coalition of public defender offices and related service providers coordinated by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law since 2003. COD Network members seek to address the needs of clients beyond the immediate criminal case, to engage in systemic reform of failed criminal justice policies, and to enlist the involvement of community

members in developing and implementing these problem-solving approaches. Eight years after its founding, the COD Network includes nearly 100 members, including 60 defender programs.

In 2009, the COD Network developed its “*Ten Principles of Community Oriented Defense*”. These Principles were developed by the Brennan Center in consultation with members of the Community Oriented Defender (COD) Network’s Advisory Group. The *Ten Principles of Community Oriented Defense* identifies the goals of participants in the COD Network. The Principles serve as a useful tool to inspire staff, educate the public, and build the capacity of the COD movement to make a difference for clients, families and communities.^{vi}

Members of the COD Network, recognizing that community oriented defense services may take many forms (reflecting local imperatives, unique office priorities, resource constraints, and other factors), embrace the following goals:

- 1. Create a Client-Centered Practice** - We aspire to employ a diverse group of attorneys, investigators, social workers and other advocates who respect their clients' wishes and goals, and who work together to ensure that the dignity of every client is honored.
- 2. Meet Clients' Needs** - We seek to promote the life success of every client by: identifying educational gaps, mental health issues, addiction, and other needs, and linking clients with resources, opportunities, and services to meet those needs.
- 3. Partner with the Community** - We seek to maintain a local presence in the communities we serve, and to form relationships with community members, community based organizations, and community institutions (e.g., courts, schools, government, health care providers and employers) to improve case and life outcomes for clients and to strengthen families and communities.
- 4. Fix Systemic Problems** - We aspire to change policies that harm clients, families and communities (e.g., policing practices that produce racial and ethnic disparities in arrest rates).
- 5. Educate the Public** - We seek to describe the human impact of the criminal justice system to policymakers, journalists, and others so that the public can better appreciate the cost to individuals, communities, and the nation of "tough on crime" policies.
- 6. Collaborate** - We aim to create partnerships with likely and unlikely allies, including prosecutors, victims, faith-based organizations, and national and state based legal aid organizations to share ideas, promote change, and support mutual efforts.
- 7. Address Civil Legal Needs** - We seek to promote access to civil legal services to resolve clients' legal concerns in such areas as housing, immigration, family court, and public benefits, occasioned by involvement with the criminal justice system.
- 8. Pursue a Multidisciplinary Approach** - We aspire to engage not only lawyers but also social workers, counselors, medical practitioners, investigators and others to address the needs of clients, their families and communities.
- 9. Seek Necessary Support** - We seek essential funding, professionally approved workload limits, and other resources and structures sufficient to enable the COD model to succeed.

10. Engage with Fellow COD Members - We are dedicated to sharing ideas, research and models to help advance the COD movement locally and nationally in order to maximize its benefits for clients, families and communities.

DEMOGRAPHICS

VERNON PARISH: INFORMATION ON THE GENERAL POPULATION^{viii}

- An estimated 52,334 people reside in Vernon parish. 38,204 (73%) of those are 18 and over. Whites make up 75.7% of the population, African-Americans 14.2% of the population, American Indians 1.4% of the population, Asians 1.8% of the population, and Latinos 7.2% of the population.
- The median per capita income is \$18,387, 13.7% of families and 17.5% of individuals live below the poverty line.
- 65.3% of the population 16 years and over is in the labor force.
- 16% of adults in the general population did not graduate from high school.

Race	% of Vernon Population	% of US Population
White	75.7%	72.4%
Black or African American	14.2%	12.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.4%	0.9%
Asian	1.8%	4.8%
Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.2%
Persons reporting two or more races	4.1%	2.9%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	7.2%	16.3%

Poverty	% of Vernon Population	% of US Population
% of families below poverty level	13.7%	11.1%
% of individuals below poverty level	17.5%	14.3%

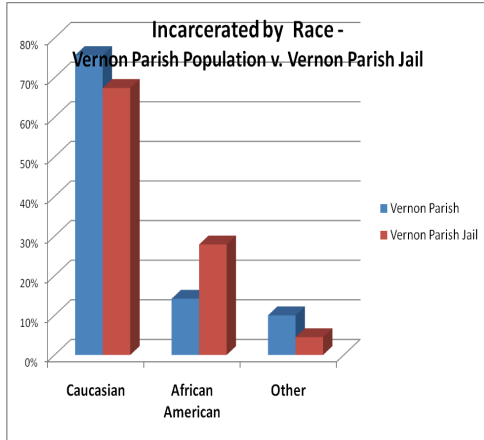
Educational Attainment	% of Vernon Population	% of US Population
High school graduate or higher	84.4%	84.6%
Bachelor's degree or higher	16.2%	27.5%

Income Category (Vernon Parish)	Income Amount
Median family income (in 2009 inflation-adjusted dollars)	\$50,221.00
Per capita income (in 2006 inflation-adjusted dollars)	\$27,041.00
Persons Below Poverty Level (2009)	14.3%

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON POPULATION OF CLIENTS INTERVIEWED

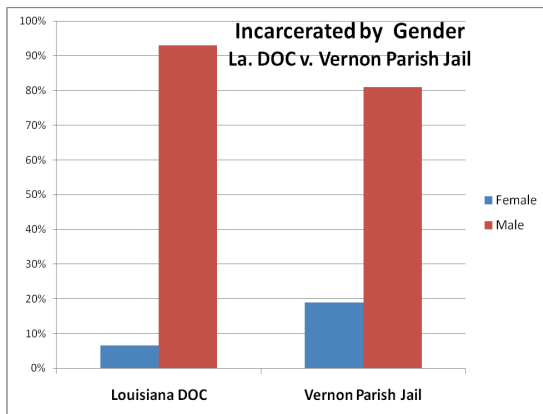
RACE:

65% of the clients interviewed were white and 28% were African-American. The 2010 population estimate for Vernon Parish was 52,334 persons, 75.7% of whom were white and 14.2% African-American. A small number of Asian, American Indian and mixed-race residents also make Vernon Parish their home. The fact that African Americans constituted 28% of the survey sample while making up only 14.2% of the area population suggests higher rates of incarceration of African-Americans.



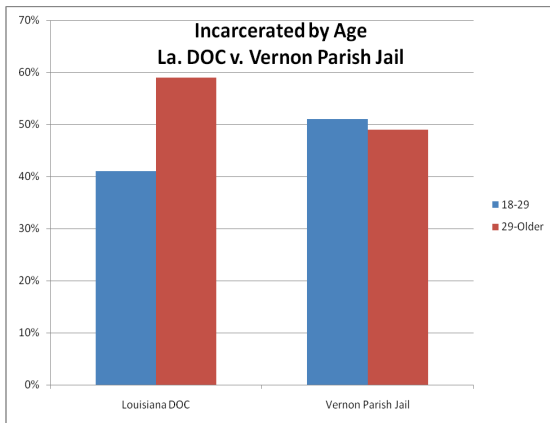
GENDER:

8 of the prisoners that we interviewed, 19% of the total interviewed, were female. 6.6% of the Louisiana correctional population was female as of December 3, 2006.^{ix}



AGE:

The average age of the clients interviewed was 27, with a range of clients between 18 and 61 years of age. More than half of the clients interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 29 years of age.



LOCAL POPULATION:

Nearly 40% of interviewed clients had lived in Vernon Parish all of their lives, and another 7% had lived in Vernon Parish more than 10 years. 16% of interviewed clients have never lived in Vernon Parish. 14% of interviewed clients had lived in Vernon Parish less than one year. The remainder (23%) had lived in Vernon Parish between one year and 10 years.

OTHER INFORMATION:

All interviewed clients were primary English speakers. 16% of interviewed clients had served in the military, all at Fort Polk.

FINDINGS

The results of this study provide further evidence to support the rising consensus among criminal justice experts that social services needs must be addressed at various points within the criminal justice system. The clients we interviewed reported issues related to employment, housing, education, mental health, developmental disabilities, drug use and homelessness. Following general trends, but in Vernon Parish specifically, the context within which the client allegedly committed a crime is often related to:

1. **Addiction:** 35% of interviewed clients reported having a drug and/or alcohol addiction.
2. **Homelessness:** 28% reported being homeless at least once in their lives.
3. **Mental illness:** 35% of all interviewed clients reported being diagnosed with a mental illness.
4. **Educational attainment:** 40% of interviewed clients did not complete high school.
5. **Prior experience in jail:** 70% of clients had been in jail on previous charges (though not all were convicted); 44% of all clients had been previously represented by a public defender.

ADDICTION:

35% of interviewed prisoners reported a drug or alcohol addiction, and additional prisoners were unsure if they were addicted or not. 12% of interviewed clients reported to have never used drugs. The average age of first drug use among interviewed clients was 15 years of age. The most frequently cited drug of choice, by a significant margin, was marijuana. Following that was crystal methamphetamine, cocaine and prescription drugs. 5% of interviewed clients reported that they have not ever used alcohol.

23% of interviewed clients have participated in some kind of substance abuse treatment program (though not necessarily the same clients that reported having an addiction).

58% of interviewed clients wish that they had access to substance abuse treatment, as either part of the disposition of their case, or as an ancillary service upon release from jail.

HOMELESSNESS:

28% of clients interviewed reported being homeless at the time of arrest or within the three previous months. Some clients were not currently homeless but expressed concern over where they would go upon release.

Homelessness represents a major issue for public defender offices. Homeless people’s arrests often are related to their lack of shelter, and public defenders’ offices often inherit the most vulnerable homeless clients. Public defenders’ contact with homeless people is an important point of opportunity for social service intervention.

A comprehensive search for Vernon Parish-based homeless shelters revealed no in-parish beds for persons in need of short-term emergency housing, or long-term housing.

MENTAL ILLNESS:

Of the prisoners interviewed, 35% reported being diagnosed with a mental illness by a doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist. The adjacent chart shows the mental health issues reported, along with the number of people who reported each issue. Many clients who suffered from mental illnesses reported multiple issues, most frequently depression and anxiety. 30% of the clients interviewed reported having attempted suicide. 16% had been hospitalized for a mental health issue. 56% of clients interviewed stated that they wanted mental health treatment.

Mental Health Issues Among Clients Interviewed at Vernon Parish Jail	
Suicide Attempts	30% of all interviewed
Doctor diagnosis	35% of all interviewed
Medication for mental health issue	40% of all interviewed
Hospitalization for mental health issue	16% of all interviewed
Want mental health treatment	56% of all interviewed

Due to the prevalence of mental illness among Vernon Parish Jail prisoners, understanding how mental illnesses affects client behavior is prerequisite for attorneys to be able to meet their clients’ needs. Further, the concentration of mentally

ill people in jail provides an opportunity for public defenders to procure assessments from experts and facilitate access to appropriate care. If mental illness goes undetected, or untreated, mentally ill clients represented by the public defender may end up cycling back through the justice system.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND SPECIAL EDUCATION:

Compared to educational attainment in Vernon Parish as a whole, clients in the Vernon Parish Jail were less likely to have graduated high school and less likely to have earned a bachelor’s degree. 40% of interviewed clients did not complete high school. However, of these 40% (17 clients), 35% (6 clients) had gone on to attain their GED. Of the clients who did not complete high school, most left in 7th, 8th or 9th grades. 16% of interviewed clients had completed some college, or had received a Bachelor’s Degree.

The large number of clients who reported attending special education classes suggests that special education attendance is associated with a higher likelihood of being arrested. 33% of all clients interviewed reported that they were enrolled in special education classes while in elementary, middle, and/or high school.

Educational Attainment, US Census	United States	Louisiana	Vernon Parish
High school graduates	80%	75%	84.4%
Bachelor's degree or higher	24%	19%	16.2%

RECIDIVISM:

The clients interviewed at Vernon Parish Jail in this study ranged from 18 years of age to 61 years of age. The mean age of interviewed clients was 27 years of age; the mode of interviewed clients was 22 years of age.

The average age of first arrest ranged from 14 years of age to 28 years of age, with the average age of first arrest being 18 years of age.

30% of interviewed clients reported that they had never been arrested before. 30% of interviewed clients were incarcerated for the second time. 25% reported that they had been arrested more than 5 times prior to their current incarceration (though not all arrests and time spent in jail had resulted in or been a result of a criminal conviction).

35% of interviewed clients were on probation at the time of their arrest. 7% of interviewed clients were on parole at the time of their arrest. 51% of interviewed clients had no status with any criminal justice system at the time of their arrest. The remainder (7%) were unknown/unsure/refused to answer.

44% of interviewed clients reported that they had been represented by a Vernon Parish public defender on a previous charge.

While incarceration has been the weapon of choice in America’s fight against crime, shrinking budgets have raised many questions about the public safety return on incarceration policies. Using recidivism as a performance measure and contextualizing it within local policy considerations is a complex

undertaking, requiring participation from all criminal justice stakeholders and community leaders, as well as thoughtful data collection and analysis. Nationally, recidivism rates seem to be hovering near 45.5%^x. The Department of Corrections in Louisiana reported the state recidivism rate for adult offenders was 49.1%^{xi}. This indicates that nearly half of the time, while incarceration may suspend criminal activity, it does not deter it in the future. Every person who recidivates, presumably, means that another individual has been victimized. Common-sense public safety and community building interests should capitalize on the financial reality that has inspired closer attention to incarceration policies.

Utilizing a social worker/social services coordinator employed by the Public Defenders' Office may be an effective way to ensure appropriate sentences, while also utilizing this staff to facilitate client access to needed social services. In this way, a social worker/social services coordinator may reduce the number of clients who return for representation from the public defender system, and also reduce workload and expenditure for all other criminal justice stakeholders, including judges, law enforcement, prosecutors, and probation staff. Employing this staff within the Public Defenders' Office makes the most sense, because their advocacy role from this position will encourage fuller disclosure, more accurate service requests and a deeper, more trusting relationship.

"By reducing the rate of offenders who return to prison, we keep our communities safer, our families more intact, and we're able to begin reinvesting incarceration costs to other critical services."

Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, January 4, 2011

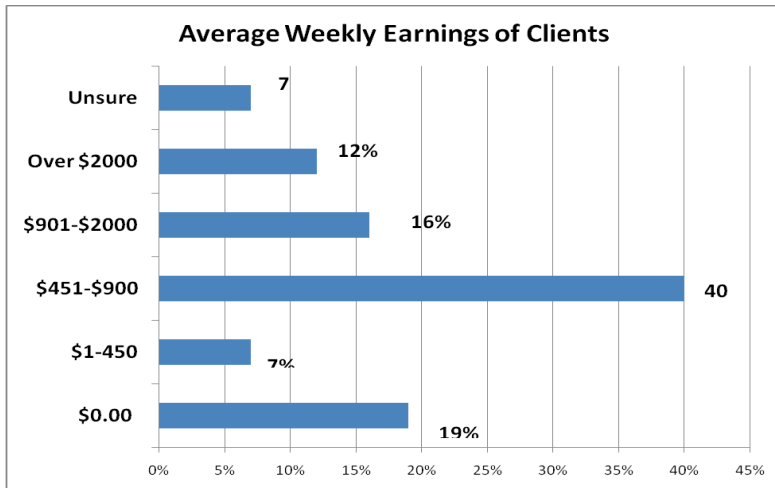
OTHER FINDINGS

EMPLOYMENT & INCOME:

In the month prior to their arrest, 49% of interviewed clients were working. Of those 49% who were working (21 clients), 71% (15 clients) were employed in full-time positions.

19% of interviewed clients reported their average monthly income over the three months prior to their arrest at \$0. 7% of interviewed clients were unsure of their average monthly income. 7% of interviewed clients reported their average monthly income for the three months prior to their arrest to fall between \$1-\$450. Nearly 40% of interviewed clients reported their average monthly income over the three months of their arrest to fall between \$451-\$900. 16% of interviewed clients reported their average monthly income over the three months of their arrest to fall between \$901-\$2,000. 12% of interviewed clients reported their average monthly income over the three months of their arrest to exceed \$2,000/month.

56% of interviewed clients reported significant fluctuation in their income from week to week.



The median per capita income for Vernon Parish is \$20,070 annually or \$1,672.50 monthly (2009 values). This is slightly less than the media per capita income across Louisiana, which is \$22,525 or \$1877.08 monthly (2009 values).

The 30th JDC Public Defenders’ Office only represents clients who qualify for a public defender after doing an indigency determination. Accused persons with income of up to twice the amount of the federal poverty line can still qualify for public defender services, since determination takes into account income, debt, children, and other factors.

40% of interviewed clients said that they felt their previous criminal record made it difficult for them to get a job. 77% of interviewed clients said that they would be interested in job training, or assisting finding a job. Client interest in this service was significantly higher than interest in any other service asked about (including education, substance abuse and mental health training).

Note: Many clients stated that they were uncomfortable talking about their financial situation, perhaps because of concern that it would compromise their ability to access a public defender. Also, if a client engages in illegal activity to supplement income, they may also be hesitant to report the additional income.

CHILDREN:

58% of the clients interviewed have children. Of the male clients interviewed, the percentage with children was 57%; for female clients, the percentage was 63%. 40% of clients with children reported being the main provider in their household at the time of their arrest. 28% of interviewed clients were living with their children at the time of arrest.

Clients revealed a varied history for their own upbringing. Nearly 26% of clients were raised by their father alone (including father and possible step-mother). The same number, nearly 26%, were raised by their mother alone (including mother and possible step-father). 21% of interviewed clients reported being raised by both biological parents. 21% reported being raised by someone other than a parent, usually a grandparent, or an aunt. However, 23% also reported spending part or all of their childhood in

the foster care system. When considering clients who were in the foster care system, and clients who had siblings in the foster care system, the number jumps to 30% of interviewed clients.

HEALTH:

21% of interviewed clients reported having health insurance. 16% of clients interviewed reported a major, documented head injury before the age of 18.

FINANCIAL COSTS

The average cost per day to be incarcerated in Vernon Parish Jail is \$22.00 - \$25.00 per day. Unlike state correctional facilities that receive most of their tax-based funding through state appropriation, the cost of detaining pre-trial defendants incarcerated in Parish jails is born by the local tax base.

The administration of criminal justice should strive to deliver verdicts that are swift, accurate, fair and final. Speedy verdicts that compromise client rights are obviously not a solution that serves the cause of justice, or the welfare of the people, but backlogs in the criminal justice system have made it an increasingly significant part of local government costs.

Citizens should be informed of these costs, and demand a criminal justice system that is both effective and efficient. The path to achieving safe, strong communities requires being smart on crime. Across the country, federal, state and local governments are paying the price for narrowly being “tough on crime.”

Of the 43 prisoners in Vernon Parish Jail who were interviewed on March 22-23, 2011, 15 remained incarcerated, with their cases still pending, as of July 31, 2011. The cost of detention for these 15 prisoners for only the period of time between the survey and the final draft of this report is between \$42,900 and \$48,750.

This amount of money would cover the cost of a social worker/social services coordinator salary for a year.

“Prison costs are blowing holes in state budgets but barely making a dent in recidivism rates. At the same time, policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of research-backed strategies for community corrections – better ways to identify which offenders need a prison cell and which can be safely handled in the community... In exploring such alternatives, lawmakers are learning that current prison growth is not driven primarily by a parallel increase in crime, or a corresponding surge in the population at large. Rather, it flows principally from a wave of policy choices that are sending more law-breakers to prison.”

-- Pew Center for the States, “One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008”, pg 3

CLIENT PERCEPTIONS:

One of the goals of this project was to explore how clients perceive the quality of representation provided to them by a Vernon Parish public defender. When asked about their perceptions of any problems with the public defender offices, client responses generally fell into one of two categories.

First, prisoners articulated widespread recognition of the lack of resources in the 30th JDC Public Defenders' Office:

"There aren't enough public defenders in Vernon Parish and they need more, because they need to reduce caseloads. They probably need better pay too – I mean they're public defenders."

"It seems like maybe they aren't paying public defenders enough money to be able to put more hours and time into their work representing their clients."

"I don't have all the info I want and need, and I haven't been able to talk to a lawyer. How can I? My lawyer already has too many clients."

"The fact that he is a regular lawyer for people that pay, he doesn't have time for public defender work since we can't pay."

"I feel like the public defender only gets paid enough to do the bare minimum."

"There is a case overload – you have to wait so long just to get a court date."

Second, prisoners identified a common desire for more communication with their public defenders. The overwhelming perception among interviewed clients is that their lawyer is supposed to be working for them, but that they cannot communicate with them as frequently or meaningfully as they would like:

"I can't talk to lawyer because he won't come over here."

"My public defender doesn't take the time to come visit and see what really is going on with the case. He only receives the paperwork."

"Some public defenders don't get info from you and they don't come see you. They wait until court when you can come to them. How can they work out your problems if they see you only 5 minutes before court?"

When asked about problems in the larger criminal justice system, the most common response was that clients felt like they were set up to fail. Frequently cited examples were corrupt police officers that committed more crimes than they did, excessive sentencing, and the lack of probation officers that directly and indirectly contribute to contact with the criminal justice system:

"This is an opportunity that could be helping me. Jail is not helping, it is making things worse."

"They mess over a lot of people with drug charges, giving them more time for drug offenses than murder or sex offenses. I was never given a chance to get to drug court or go on probation."

"In this system, you are guilty until proven innocent. Probation is paying a lot of money and my P.O. doesn't even know who I am."

"You're in trouble if you are not part of the local network. It's all about who you know – there are different rules for different people."

"The system goes so slow and then it goes so fast. Once you get to court, there is not enough time to really look at everyone's individual circumstances."

"The system doesn't take time to explain the process – it doesn't really try to help people go to rehab and give them a chance to change."

CONCLUSION:

This preliminary investigation of 43 pre-trial, public defender appointed prisoners in Vernon Parish Jail reveals overwhelming needs within the prisoner population and confirms the value of integrating social services support – ideally through the addition of a staff social worker and/or social services coordinator – into the Vernon Parish Public Defenders' Office. The vast majority of prisoners face life crises in mental health, addiction, employment opportunity, housing, education and physical/mental disability in addition to their criminal charge. While incarcerated, their support systems – emotional, financial and social service – often deteriorate. Increased attention to these issues, and available resources to develop creative, effective defense recommendations will improve outcomes for defendants while giving them a better chance to become a productive member of the community.

Implementation of a comprehensive defender program – when it complies with national and state standards – is the definition of 'quality public defense'. Far from diminishing everyday legal representation, comprehensive defender advocacy augments it.

The U.S. Department of Justice recommends: "The key to preventing crowding and to managing the jail

population is to continuously collect, monitor and analyze admission and length of stay information, then to share the results with other justice officials and with officials in leadership positions in general government.”^{xii} Toward this end, LJC hopes the Vernon Parish ExtraLegal Needs Assessment encourages this conversation among all criminal justice stakeholders in Vernon Parish.

Every client presents a unique case – and every crime has a back-story that deserves attention. This limited Needs Assessment provides raw data to illustrate the scope of extralegal issues in the lives of indigent defendants in the 30th JDC – issues that almost always are related to a defendant’s criminal charge. Additionally, the data in this report confirms that local criminal justice systems need to develop local programs to address local challenges. LJC supports the development of a program in the 30th JDC Public Defenders’ Office that advocates for solutions that are specifically tailored to Vernon Parish’ needs and resources.

LJC supports public defenders’ effort to prevent wrongful convictions, over-incarceration and excessive sentencing. Beyond guilt or innocence, social service support offered through public defender offices will help defenders embrace a delivery model that finds effective, comprehensive sentencing options that reflect a zealous effort to connect clients with social services and treatment programs available in their community, for the betterment of all.

“There are new, innovative models that better protect public safety, smartly utilize limited tax dollars and strengthen communities by investing in members of those communities. The jail doesn't have to be the center of your community.”

*-- Heather H. Hall
Administrator, LJC and Special Projects Advisor, LPDB*

ⁱ Louisiana Department of Corrections, HB 1, 2011 Legislative Session, pg 71.

ⁱⁱ The Pew Center on the States, One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008, pg 35.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Probation and Parole in the United States, 2003. Bulletin NCJ 205336 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, July 2004) p. 7

^{iv} National Institute of Corrections, <http://nicic.gov/StateStats/?State=LA>

^v National Institute of Corrections, <http://nicic.gov/StateStats/?State=LA>

^{vi} National Association of State Budget Officers, “State Expenditure Report” series; Percentage point increases are based on a re-analysis of data in this series) in Pew Report: 1 in 100, p. 14

^{vii} These Principles can be accessed on the Brennan Center website at:

http://www.brennancenter.org/content/pages/2011_cod_conference

^{viii} Demographic data taken from the 2010 census information, online at:

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

^{ix} Louisiana Department of Corrections: Statistics. Accessed online on June 19, 2008.

www.corrections.state.la.us/files/stats/c.pdf

^x The Pew Center on the States, State of Recidivism: America’s Revolving Prison System, pg 9.

^{xi} Louisiana Department of Corrections Performance Indicator, HB 1, 2011 Legislative Session, pg 72.

^{xii} U.S. Department of Justice, “Preventing Jail Crowding: A Practical Guide”