

'The jail is bursting at the seams'

Overcrowding puts pressure on staff, inmates

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

11-17-91
SANTA CRUZ Overcrowding is the single biggest contributor to a variety of problems at the County Jail on Water Street.

Notwithstanding an escape by two "dangerous" inmates Oct. 22 — which an embarrassed Sheriff Al Noren attributed to a faulty lock on a holding cell and slipshod security — the jail's woes are rooted in the fact it routinely houses 43 percent more inmates than it was designed to hold.

"Everyone in here is in crisis," said the Rev. Peggy Thompson, the jail's chaplain. "There's a lot of stress and frustration."

The jail, opened in 1981 and expanded in 1986, has a capacity of 224. Its average occupancy for the month of September was just shy of 400 inmates a night.

These overcrowded conditions play a key role in the six jail problems most commonly cited by observers, justice system officials, law enforcement authorities, former and present jail staff, attorneys and ex-inmates:

Please see **OVERCROWDING** — A6



Built for 224 inmates, the Water Street jail averaged nearly 400 inmates a night in September.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Overcrowding puts squeeze on jail operations

Continued from Page A1

- Without enough bunk space, inmates must sleep on floors and in daytime recreation rooms;

- The close quarters increase tension among inmates, and between prisoners and detention officers. Fights among inmates are common;

- The premium on space adds fuel to the fire of the gang presence at the jail, where lesser inmates are bullied into giving up space in the day recreation areas.

- The overpopulation slows the movement of inmates into, out of and within the jail for medical care, counseling and court dates. Visits by family and friends, attorneys and community service workers can be subject to delays because of the traffic jam of prisoners;

- Inmates who need special supervision sometimes don't get extra attention because to do so would compromise overall security at the jail.

- Overcrowding also exacerbates one of the jail's most persistent security shortcomings, the necessity that prisoners with court dates be transported to the courthouse by van instead of a tunnel or walkway.

In the jail's day rooms, bunks are stacked three high, and mattresses are spread out on the floor. The rooms serve as the jail's recreational centers, where inmates play cards, watch soap operas and talk.

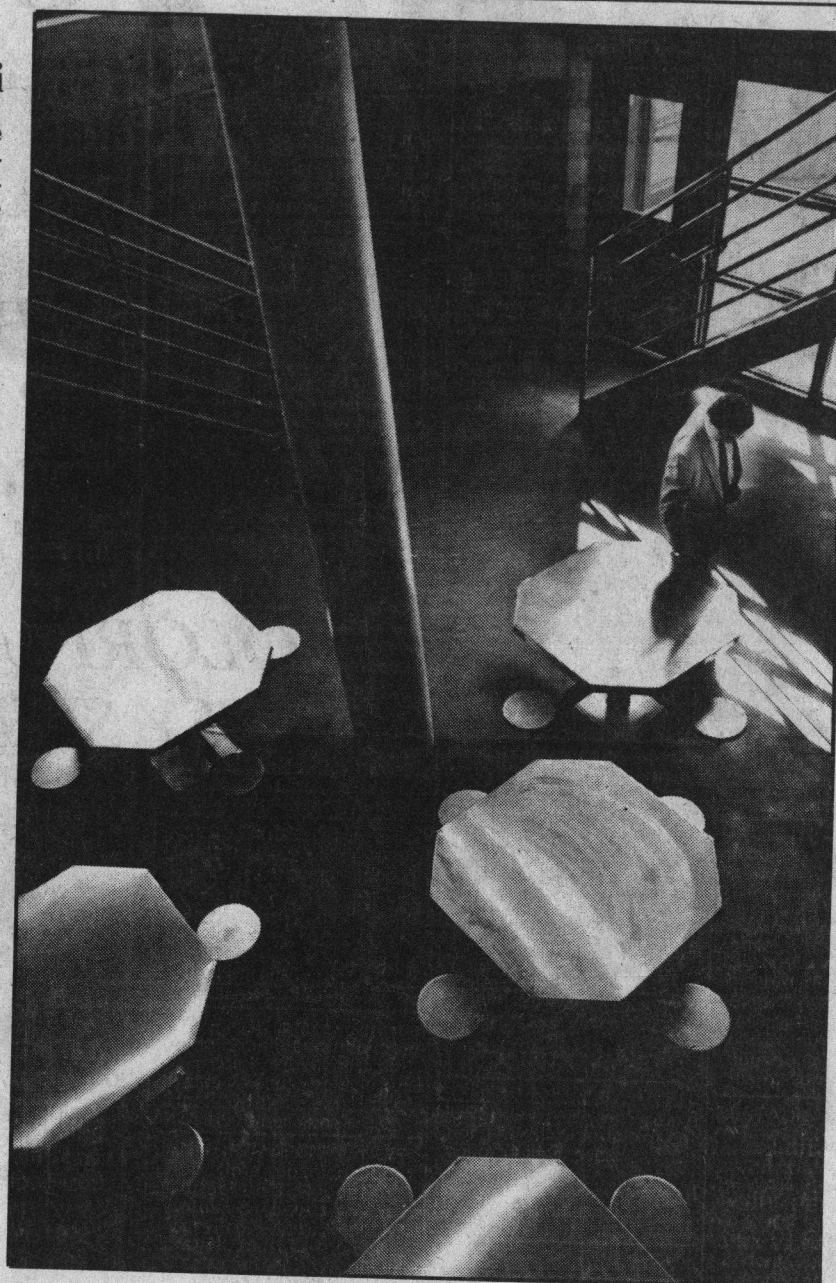
"The jail is bursting at the seams," said Stuart Rich, a local private attorney. "They don't have the personnel to take care of the flow and as a result, when they reach the peak period from Friday to Sunday there's delays in bookings, mistakes being made, just the sort of problems you have when you overload a system," he said.

The system overload also leads to fights among inmates, despite efforts by jail staff to avoid potential problems by keeping certain types of prisoners, including rival gang members, separated.

"A number of (the inmates) are aggressive and to my mind a lot of guys, particularly the young ones, are being preyed upon over there," said public defender Jon Minsloff who has represented hundreds of jail inmates.

"We're dealing with a segment of society that really has problems," said county Sheriff Al Noren, "and we're expected to deal with them without any difficulties and that's not in the cards all the time."

Fighting between inmates, said Noren, "happens and we try to avoid it. ... I'm not saying it's OK,



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

When the County Jail opened in 1986, sterile surroundings were believed to make for tighter security.

but it's not unusual."

"They try to keep people separated, but there is only so much protective custody to go around," said Rich.

A Boulder Creek man who recently spent a week in jail for driving on a suspended license said he witnessed a group of inmates threaten to throw another prisoner off a jail tier, all over space on a couch in the day room.

"The gangs flat out tell you what to do," he said. "There's a lot of people getting beat up."

On Nov. 8, five jail inmates allegedly beat up a 30-year-old man in a dispute over a commissary bag, according to a report. During the at-

tack, one of the suspects reportedly told the victim, "We have people in this jail that will get you."

Noren said the county is "fortunate in a sense that we don't have the gang problems that they have in other places. But we do have gangs. ... (Plus) you get people who are just downright nasty, who can't get along on the outside let alone when confined," he said.

"If you're a member of the Elks Lodge before you get arrested, when you get arrested you're still a member of the Elks Lodge," Noren said. "We've got gang members in jail but that doesn't mean it's a breeding ground."

Tension among inmates also

spills over to detention officers. A former high-ranking officer at the jail said, "I worked four years in narcotics investigation and it was less stressful than 1½ years in the jail."

"The detention officers have a tough job," said Rich. "They're subject to the same type of conditions that the prisoners are. It's an overcrowded work situation where the officers feel the stress and strain just as much as the prisoners. They are virtually captive themselves," he said.

A veteran jail health worker said detention officers — who work three or four 12-hour shifts a week — and jail staff have their work cut out for them.

"We do a good job with what we've got," she said. "Just getting toilet paper to 400 people a day takes enough time. Guards are required to be at the door when the nurses give out medications. ...

"The guards have to move people back and forth to see attorneys, move them into court, to see the pretrial (probation) people, chaplain, it just compounds the situation. ...

"I've seen these guys take much abuse from people," said. "In the last six or seven — with all they put up with — seen few or no incidents of detention officers just going off."

Some of the worst beating incidents between inmates, she said, happen "going back and forth to court."

According to a member of the county's Criminal Justice Council, the daily practice of transporting inmates via van to court is one of the most persistent headaches for jail staff.

One-fourth of the jail's population — as many as 100 — must be transported to court each day, said Chief Deputy Wally Walker.

Design and capacity of the current jail was the subject of much community debate in the late '70s. Among the proposals at the time was a tunnel underneath Water Street to transfer inmates to appearances at the nearby County Courthouse. That idea, however, was scotched, due at least in part to the jail's proximity to a flood plain and prohibitive costs.

"A major design shortcoming of the system and the facility is the requirement that we load people into vans, transporting prisoners in daisy chains of six to 12 at a time," said the council member.

"What's going to happen when one of those vans — inmates manacled together with no seat belts — is in an accident? We're going to pay for 20 tunnels (in lawsuit set-

tlements)."

During the course of a year, some 40,000 people — roughly the population of the city of Santa Cruz — will be processed in and out of the Water Street jail.

"When you add numbers of people like that, it taxes your ability to provide the services to some degree," said Noren. "Staff is busy, and they can't be in every place at the same time."

Overcrowding means it takes extra time and precautions to move inmates for visits with attorneys, doctors, social service workers and probation officers.

It also means inmates who need special counseling sometimes take a backseat to the greater priority of security.

"For attorneys, there is a big problem with access to clients and the waiting period getting in and out," said Steve Wright, a former public defender now in private practice.

"We have cases of people not wanting to provide services to the

jail because they have to wait so long," said the health worker.

"The staff really tries to want to come to work and do a good job," she said. "I'll see detention officers come to me and a nurse to try and get some personal service for an inmate. They try to pull their load."

But with the overcrowding, "Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. becomes not exactly a priority," she said.

Despite the problems caused by overcrowding, most polled considered the jail to be one of the better facilities in the state.

"It's as decent or more decent as any jail in the state," said Minsloff. A state parole officer called the facility "one of the better jails."

"Relatively speaking," said the Criminal Justice Council member, "our jail is probably one of the safest and one of the most preferable to do time in. ...

"I've talked to many prisoners who would be appalled and terrified at the prospect of doing time at most other jails."