

Record number of prisoners are jammed into county jails

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

Oakland County's jail population reached a record high Saturday, and unless current trends are reversed the jail will likely be jammed to capacity even after a 200-bed addition is opened in December.

The jail population at the Pontiac facility has been averaging more than 600 for a month, well above the 450-inmate limit set by a 1982 court order. The jail meets the guidelines by placing prisoners temporarily in a gym or in holding cells.

The number of prisoners controlled by the county is actually much higher, reaching a high of nearly 1,200 in February. Excess prisoners are farmed out to other locations in Oakland County and outside.

Law enforcement officials cited a number of reasons, including a crackdown on drugs and higher unemployment rates, for the increase of prisoners.

"WE HAVE everything from traffic offenders to murderers," said Lt. Barry Eriksen, a 16-year veteran of the county sheriff's department. Inmates can include those convicted of misdemeanors or those charged with a felony and awaiting trial.

To deal with the crush of prisoners, other law enforcement agencies in Oakland County have been asked to keep prisoners charged with misdemeanors in their own facilities, according to Lt. Gerald Reeves of the Oakland County Sheriff Department. He is in charge of monitoring the 1982 court order limiting inmates to 450.

"We don't stop the felons but we put out messages not to bring the misdemeanors," Reeves said.

Until last month, the number of inmates in county jail averaged 570 daily; during a 12-month period, based upon records maintained by the Oakland County Sheriff Department.

One month ago the number jumped to over 600 for the first time. During a five-day period last week, the number averaged 632 daily. Saturday a record 673 prisoners were held.

Although the court order limiting inmates to 450 stands, Reeves said more than that number arrive at the jail and until he is ordered to stop accepting new inmates, they must be accommodated.

The overflow is bunked in holding cells where new inmates are normally booked or in the jail gymnasium where inmates sleep on mattresses on the floor. The holding cells

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— Sheriff John Nichols

can sleep 24 inmates. The overflow into the gym often exceeds 100, according to Reeves.

"I'D IDEALLY LIKE to see not more than 20 to 50 inmates in the gym but we can't close our doors," Reeves said.

"The gym is used when we have overflow, which is every night," said Eriksen who oversees jail operations during the day.

"Every morning we clear the gym out and take them to court," making room for exercise by inmates or visits with families and attorneys, he added.

At night the gym is like a bus stop, according to Reeves, who said new inmates are continuously added and others who have posted bond are continuously released.

Because of the constant change in inmate population, Oakland County Sheriff John Nichols cautions against relying on figures "for the entire picture."

"You have to be careful with numbers when dealing with prisoners. There are a lot of unknown factors. This is an entirely mobile population. A lot come in and a lot go out," Nichols said, pointing to inmates who spend a night or less in jail and then are released after paying fines or posting bonds.

"We could face overcrowding (in the new facility) if we don't take some additional steps," Nichols said, but certain options are open, such as double bunking in the new facility.

More than double bunking, however, may be necessary to relieve future overcrowding.

The total number of inmates now in the jail system — those in the Oakland County jail as well as those who are in satellite locations or in county jails elsewhere — exceeded 1,100 for the first time in February.

"THE NUMBER was a shock, unprecedented in Oakland County," said Reeves.

Nichols also admits the number is startling. "The so-called experts told us we would have 1,100 prisoners by 1990 but we have 1,194 right now."

In addition to those in jail, inmates who have been sentenced and sentenced are sent to satellite facilities, including the Southfield city jail

where the county has space for 55 men after recently converting cells formerly used for women prisoners.

The conversion caused an outcry from members of the Southfield Police Officers Association who decried the recent transfer of 42 male prisoners from the county jail into the city facility.

Two wings of the county jail, buildings D (formerly for women) and L, are housed in county buildings separated from the main jail complex. They were recently converted into cells with beds for 100 men.

Over 100 are housed at a minimum security trustee camp in Orion Township, and another 100 men and 24 women participate in a work release program that is housed in county facilities across the street from the jail. These prisoners spend nights in jail and are released daily for jobs in the community.

Ninety-six inmates from Oakland County are also completing jail sentences in county jails throughout

Michigan at a daily cost of \$40-50 each.

"Two or three times a week we ship prisoners to outcounty facilities to offload the overlap in this facility," said Eriksen. Sixty Oakland County inmates are in the Allegan County Jail, 20 are in Iosco, 10 in Osego and six in Mackinac county jails. Oakland County also has contract agreements to house prisoners in Shiawassee and Monroe county jails.

"Reasons for increasing jail populations are unknown, possibly the crackdown on drugs or increased unemployment in the county. Whatever the reasons, every possible jail bed in this state is in use. We're always looking for alternatives, new ideas for incarceration," Eriksen added.

In spite of crowding, Reeves said, "We are not trying to ventilate the jails and kick people out."


Nichols is not overly concerned with crowding. "Crime continues to go up as the population goes up. Whether or not there are viable alternatives that will prove to be adequate, I don't know," he said, citing electronic surveillance where jail terms are served at home under strict supervision.

"I'm not crossing that bridge (overcrowding in the new addition) until we come to it," Nichols said.






STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Inmates in a holding cell at the Oakland County Jail share crowded conditions. Since February, over 600 inmates have been housed in the jail daily.


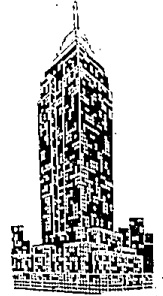


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Lt. Barry Eriksen, day officer in charge of the Oakland County Jail.

Over 1,000

County sends inmates to points near and far

The Oakland County Jail has room for 450 inmates, yet it is not unusual for the county to be responsible for over 1,000 prisoners. Here is how it was done during a recent week:

- 450 inmates were kept in the county jail in accordance with a 1982 court order.
- 24 were in special holding cells.
- 100 or more inmates slept on the floor of the jail gymnasium. This figure is in flux as some prisoners make bond and others are brought in.
- 43 prisoners were transferred to the city jail in Southfield where the county has a contract to house up to 55 prisoners.
- 100 prisoners were housed in two jail wings, called buildings D

and L, that are separate from the main jail complex.

- More than 100 prisoners were at a minimum security trustee camp in Orion Township.
- Another 100 men and 24 women were in a work-release program that is housed in county facilities across the street from the jail. These prisoners spend nights in jail and are released daily for jobs in the community.
- 96 inmates from Oakland County were completing jail sentences in county jails throughout Michigan that contract with Oakland. Currently there are 60 in the Allegan County Jail, 30 in the Iosco County Jail, 10 in the Osego County Jail and six in the Mackinac County Jail.