

Exploring Satisfaction and the Perception of Economic Impact among Communities Hosting Correctional Institutions: A Qualitative Examination of Four Rural Communities in Pennsylvania

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Abstract

This study examined factors found to be problematic in the prison-community relationship and in perceptions of the economic impact of correctional institutions in four rural Pennsylvania communities. Focus group interviews provided data that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and rural communities can use when seeking to improve prison-community relationships or when new prison construction is being considered. The content analysis revealed important themes, and the relevance of each theme is discussed regarding how correctional institutions and host communities might improve strained relationships. This study helps to fill a void within the literature related to prison siting and prison-community relationships.

Keywords: Prisons, Prison siting, Rural communities, Prison-community relationship, Correctional institutions, Economic impact

Prisons are big business in America, with correctional populations continuing to reach record numbers both nationally and within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania ("Prison Inmate Count," 2003). In rural areas of the state, prisoners represent a fast-growing segment of the population.¹ The prison "industry" can be particularly attractive and potentially important in rural areas, especially in communities that are struggling economically. Some rural residents view prisons as an economic panacea while others consider them anathema to their way of life. The nature and intensity of such views, as well as possible mechanisms for improving both the positive economic impact of prisons and the prison-community relationship, are the major focus of this study. This study examines how four rural communities in Pennsylvania perceive the economic impact of state correctional facilities located there and how satisfied residents are with these prisons as elements of the community. For the study, selected community stakeholders, including residents, government officials, and community leaders, either received a survey in the mail or participated in a focus group. Based on responses to surveys and focus-group interviews, as well as interviews with administrators from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC), policy recommendations were developed to help all parties involved in prison siting and operation improve their understanding of factors affecting them, both personally and professionally. The research discussed here represents the focus group interview component of this much larger effort (Courtright, Hannan, Packard, & Brennan, 2006). With 26 correctional institutions located across the state, the DOC provides myriad employment opportunities for approximately 14,000 residents (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2003). As is true nationally, the majority of Pennsylvania state correctional institutions (SCIs) are located in rural communities.

¹ Some states, as of late, have been able to reduce their prison population, resulting in prison closure (see, for instance, "New York Closing 4 Prisons," 2014).

Shichor (1992) observes that prisons are often sited in areas of lower prestige because large institutions offer the promise or at least the possibility of economic revitalization. Many residents thus see the siting of a local prison as desirable. Very few studies, however, have systematically addressed what becomes of the prison-community relationship after a prison becomes operational (i.e., post-siting). Furthermore, few studies have examined the *perception* of the economic impact a prison has had on the local economy. Following the assumption that prisons are unlikely to close (or even reduce their populations), the present effort is part of an ongoing attempt to analyze these issues and thereby possibly improve the siting process for future correctional facilities and/or the sometimes strained relationships that prisons have with their host communities.

Literature Review

Since 1980, the United States has experienced a significant increase in prison construction, particularly in rural areas. According to Huling (2002), prior to 1980, only 36% of prisons were located in rural communities and small towns. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the average number of new prisons built in rural areas each year was four. The figure increased to 16 in the 1980s, and, by the 1990s, it had reached 25 (Huling, 2002). During the 1990s, 245 prisons were built in the United States in 212 rural counties (Whitfield, 2008). As a result of economic need, many small towns actively compete to have prisons built in their communities, although not all residents are eager to add prisons to the landscape (Beale, 1996). Opponents of plans to build prisons in rural communities cite a variety of potential problems, including (a) the fear that crime rates will increase in the host community (Abrams et al., 1992; Martin & Myers, 2005; Whitfield, 2008); (b) the unwelcome in-migration of families relocating to the area to be closer to their incarcerated relatives (Martin & Myers, 2005; Shichor, 1992); (c) a decrease in the value of properties located near the correctional facility (Abrams & Lyons, 1987; Abrams et al., 1992; Imhoff, 2002; Martin, 2000; Shichor, 1992; Smykla et al., 1984); (d) the hiring of outsiders rather than community residents for jobs in the prisons (King, Mauer, & Huling, 2004); and (e) new business and tourism fail to take hold because of a community's reputation as a "prison town" (Whitfield, 2008).

Groot and Latessa (2007) note that prison construction in rural areas has been projected to provide a number of economic benefits: improved employment opportunities, goods and services, property values, political clout, and tax revenues, as well as an inmate labor pool and the retention of young people who, with steady employment, remain in the area and raise families. Despite these rosy projections, it has been difficult to identify the economic impacts of prison construction and operation because there have been few post-empirical impact studies of prisons in rural areas using a control group or comparison with rural areas that did not have prisons (Whitfield, 2008). Opponents of prisons in rural areas cite a variety of financial concerns, including lowered property values, increases in the cost of living, stress on existing infrastructure, and environmental impact (Groot & Latessa, 2007). The issues that have provoked the most research relate to the impact of rural prisons on employment, goods and services, property values, and infrastructure. Prison construction and the employment it generates is thought to be a way to boost economic development and rural population growth (Abrams & Lyons, 1987; Blankenship & Yanarella, 2004; Gibbons & Pierce, 1995). Swanson (1997) assessed residents' perception of the social and economic effects of the siting of a new prison on their community by conducting interviews with residents in Century, Florida. The first survey, conducted late in the construction process, was designed to ascertain resident satisfaction with the community, community lifestyle preferences, levels of support for the prison, and expectations about how the prison would affect the community. A comparison of residents' responses to open-ended questions regarding their *expectations* about the effects of the prison siting (late in the construction process) versus their perceptions of *realized* benefits four years later produced interesting results. As Swanson notes

Before the prison opened, respondents had expectations that the prison would provide new jobs in the community. However, they also believed the prison would have a multiplier effect, stimulating economic growth beyond prison jobs. In 1995 [after the prison had been operational for four years], respondents were less likely to identify multiplier effects, focusing almost exclusively on prison-related employment. (p. 150) Over the four years time of the study, prison supporters continued to identify economic benefits produced by the prison. Opponents of the prison continued to express concern with community lifestyle issues, particularly safety. In view of the community's high unemployment rate and tenuous economic conditions, utilitarian concerns continued to take precedence over lifestyle considerations. Responses to the survey items suggested that the residents' expectations for broad economic change had not been realized. Within the study's four-year time frame, unemployment in Century had decreased only 1%.

In addition, the new businesses and industries that residents thought the prison would attract to the community did not materialize. Swanson concluded that, “for citizens in communities with little possibility of economic development, the new jobs created are likely to be perceived more positively than the negative effects on community lifestyle associated with a prison siting” (p. 155). King et al. (2004) measured the impact of prison siting on unemployment and per capita income in 14 metropolitan counties in New York State, between 1977 and 2000. Seven of the 14 counties had gained a new prison since 1982; the other seven counties did not host a prison. King et al. found that, specific to employment, (a) correctional officers did not live in the host county, (b) local residents might not qualify for employment at the prison due to a lack of necessary skills or because current union members received priority in hiring, (c) the multiplier effect (i.e., the creation of spin-off jobs) was not robust, and (e) low-wage jobs went to inmates. King et al. concluded that “the apparent cost of prison siting, even if considered conservatively, appears to exceed any potential economic benefits offered to the host county” (p. 476).

According to Gilmore (2007), a prison in a local community can limit economic development. The lack of amenities in a town (e.g., shopping areas, sports venues, and recreational facilities), coupled with the looming presence of a prison, could discourage other businesses and industries that might otherwise have chosen to locate in the town. Besser and Hanson (2004) compared economic and demographic data from 1990 to 2000 for small towns with state prisons to similar towns without prisons. The researchers found that, compared to small towns without a new state prison, small towns that constructed a new state prison in the 1990s experienced higher poverty levels, higher rates of unemployment, fewer total jobs, lower household wages, fewer housing units, and a lower median value of housing units in 2000. Small towns *without* new prisons performed better economically compared to communities with prisons, as evidenced by greater job growth and increases in average household wages, number of businesses, retail sales, number of housing units and median value of housing units.

Glasmeier and Farrigan (2007) examined the effect of state-run prisons constructed in rural counties between 1985 and 1995 on county earnings by employment sector, population, poverty rate, and degree of economic health. In general, the data suggest limited economic benefits for rural communities. However, poverty rates in persistently poor rural counties may decline where prisons are constructed, as suggested by evidence of diminishing transfer payments and increasing state and local government earnings in places with relatively good economic health. The researchers note that prisons do not typically have much impact on local economies because the jobs they provide to the local population are clerical and service positions that generally pay low wages. Most often, the higher skill-level and higher-paying jobs are filled by skilled workers who have previously been employed in the prison system and have seniority. Typically, these skilled workers commute or in-migrate from outside the immediate area. Overall, the data suggest that prisons in rural areas have very little impact on the economy of counties and that they do not promote economic diversity.

As the literature reveals, the job creation that occurs when a prison is constructed in a rural community does not necessarily translate into employment opportunities for local residents. For a variety of reasons, as noted by Huling (2002), the majority of prison jobs do not go to residents already living in the community. Many rural residents are unable to meet the educational and experience requirements in order to compete for higher-paying corrections jobs, such as superintendent or deputy superintendent (Carlson, 1995; Fitchen, 1991). Seniority and, in some cases, union rules in public corrections systems give priority to veteran correctional personnel from other prisons who may choose to transfer to positions in newly constructed prisons. King, Mauer, and Huling (2003) found that local residents in New York were not able to work at the “home” correctional facility until they had acquired seniority by working at downstate prisons.

Particularly in economically depressed areas, rural residents compete for available jobs with a wider-than-usual pool of applicants (Huling, 2002). A study of prison towns in California showed that, on average, current residents of towns with new state prisons fill fewer than 20% of the new corrections jobs (Gilmore, 2007). Thomas Johnson, an economist and professor of public affairs at the University of Missouri, has studied the economic and social impact of prisons on small towns in the United States. Johnson has noted that prisons do not generate significant numbers of associated industries, such as manufacturing plants, because prisons develop few linkages to the economy (in Clement, 2002). The presence of a prison in the community will often increase the demand for goods and services, such as construction materials or food provisioning and preparation (Blankenship & Yanarella, 2004; Shichor 1992). Abrams and Lyons (1987) suggest that an increase in demand for goods and services can result in greater profits for local businesses and the development of further employment opportunities in the community.

As businesses move into an area to serve the needs of the prison, economic development can occur in the local area. On the other hand, prison-based industries often move into areas with newly constructed prisons and serve the needs of the correctional facility that local businesses are not equipped to handle (King et al., 2004). As large-scale enterprises, prisons often attract major chain enterprises, such as Walmart or McDonald's, that draw customers away from locally owned businesses. Because profits made by chains are not locally reinvested in the way that profits from locally owned businesses might be, the community may see no net increase in tax revenues and the circulation of dollars within a community may drop in absolute terms (Huling, 2002). Typically, correctional facilities purchase supplies from outside the immediate region (Shichor, 2002). Residents of rural areas often fear that a prison located in their community will cause the price of goods and services to rise, leading to an increase in the cost of living for the community (Martin, 2000). However, research has shown that prison construction in a community does not have a direct impact on the cost of living (Abrams & Lyons 1987).

Concern about property values is common among residents in communities where prisons exist or where construction is anticipated (Abrams & Lyons, 1987; Abrams et al., 1992; Martin, 2000; Smykla et al., 1984). Opponents of prison siting in their community express the belief that the value of their homes and property will decrease after the prison is constructed (Shichor, 1992). Property values may decrease when there is strong, vocal opposition to a prison, which can drive away potential buyers and investors (Groot & Latessa, 2007), but research shows this concern is usually unfounded. With the exception of land immediately next to the prison, property values elsewhere in the community are likely to increase in most markets if prison workers buy local homes (Clement, 2002). Abrams and Lyons (1987) and Shichor (1992) have found that property values are not affected when a prison is located nearby. In his study of prisons in California, Sechrest (1992) found no evidence that correctional facilities negatively affect land values in host communities. Many researchers have found that property values increase after a prison is constructed (Abrams & Martin, 1987; Sechrest, 1992; Smykla et al., 1984; Stanley, 1978).

In their bid to attract correctional facilities, small towns often purchase land and promise to build the water and sewer infrastructure necessary to accommodate the prison. For example, to meet requirements set by the state in exchange for siting a new prison in the town, community leaders in Rush City, Minnesota, raised \$700,000 in individual and business donations, added a \$40,000 contribution from the municipality, and used the total to buy the necessary acreage. Officials in Shelby, Montana, used a \$500,000 community development block grant and an \$800,000 U.S. Economic Development Administration grant to pay for infrastructure for the facility built there by Corrections Corporation of America, the largest private prison firm in the United States (Clement, 2002). As Blankenship and Yanarella (2004) suggest, the infrastructure of an area can be stressed by additional buildings, so it comes as no surprise that a concern among potential host communities is whether or not their existing infrastructure can handle the increased demand a prison would entail. The additional infrastructure needed includes water and sewer systems, waste management, roads, and other services that allow a community to function. Research has shown that policymakers usually consider the capacity of the existing infrastructure when decisions are made about where to locate a new prison (Cherry & Kuncze, 2001; Shichor, 1992). In cases in which prison construction would stress the existing infrastructure of an area, state officials usually work to improve the infrastructure, which, in turn, expands services for both the prison and the community at large (Shichor, 1992). An increase in tax revenue collection from induced development where a prison is constructed can provide additional funding to allow communities to improve the infrastructure, if needed, without straining the local budget (Blankenship & Yanarella, 2004). Because many prisons are self-contained, being equipped with their own sewage systems, power plants, and other facilities, the construction of a prison does not necessarily affect existing community services (Shichor, 1992).

Although prisons are generally viewed as non-polluting facilities, the research on the environmental effects of prison construction is limited. As Gilmore (2007) points out, if prisons are not required to conform to all environmental regulations, there may be more environmental effects than generally anticipated. As Tootle (2004) notes, "In the long run, the process of diverting capital and other resources to prison development and operation will reduce existing economic diversity within the community" (p. 13). The literature shows that further empirical evidence is needed to better reveal the impact of prisons on their local communities and the economies thereof.

Methodology

A three-pronged approach was used to measure the subjective factors of community satisfaction and perceived economic impact: (a) interviews with prison managers, (b) focus group interviews with community members and business leaders, and (c) a mail survey of randomly sampled community residents. In addition, the researchers used information provided by the Pennsylvania DOC regarding its hiring practices and procedures, including data on employees' residential distance from their respective prison of employment and average salary data.

Selection of State Correctional Institution Study Communities

Four state prison community sites were selected for the study. SCI Albion and SCI Cambridge Springs were selected based on their rural locations and proximity to the research team. Both of these prisons are located in northwestern Pennsylvania. SCI Albion and SCI Cambridge Springs represent very different institutions in several ways. SCI Cambridge Springs houses female inmates at a minimum security level while SCI Albion houses male inmates at a medium security level. Informal conversations with local borough officials in Albion and Cambridge Springs revealed significant differences in how the DOC sited these institutions and the extent to which the local communities/boroughs pursued and welcomed them. These differences are relevant because research has shown that the most significant factors affecting adverse prison-community relations are the siting process and subsequent public relations (Carlson, 1992). The other two prisons, SCI Houtzdale and SCI Dallas, were selected based on geographic diversity (i.e., one in central Pennsylvania and one in eastern Pennsylvania) and diversification of economic conditions within the sample and economic conditions within the local communities, measured using five-year average unemployment rates.

Focus Groups and Interviews

The first research objective – identification of problematic factors in the prison-community relationship – was accomplished, in part, by using two different interviewing techniques: focus group interviews with community leaders and interviews with prison officials. When possible, the focus group interviews were conducted at a municipal building near the prison. Focus groups were limited to 10 to 15 participants, with invitees including presidents of local chambers of commerce, local real estate agents, bankers, borough managers or superintendents, presidents of local school boards, prison advisory chairs, board chairs of local township governments, borough council presidents, county executives, and mayors. If unavailable to attend the focus groups, the invitees were asked to send a designated representative instead. Attendance at the focus groups is summarized in Appendix A, which shows the occupations and number of invitees in each community. All focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed via content analysis.

Appendix B lists the questions that were used to guide the focus-group interviews.

In addition, semistructured interviews with members of prison management were conducted to further assess the prison-community relationship and to allow the DOC an opportunity to provide input and perspective. Although only the analysis of the focus-group data is reported in this article, the information from the content analyses derived from both interview methods was synthesized with the other qualitative and quantitative data collected in this study and published elsewhere.

Results

The data collected from the focus group interviews suggested several themes in communities' concerns, and these themes could be categorized as relating to either of two research goals: (1) identification of factors/areas that are perceived to be problematic in the prison-community relationship, and (2) perception of the prisons' economic impact on local communities.

Problematic Areas in the Prison-Community Relationship

Concerns and Misconceptions about Types of Visitors Drawn to the Area

Once made aware that the DOC planned to open a prison in a local area, members of all four focus groups expressed concern about unwanted visitors. Concerns ranged from the effect of inmates' family members and friends spending time in local communities to the common misconception that some inmates' families and friends would relocate to be close to the prison.

The perceptions of group members regarding the type of visitors that would be drawn to their local areas were captured in the following comment: “There was a piece of land some group bought that was gonna [sic] put in low-income housing and that didn’t go over very well because the perception was that [ex-offenders or their families would] be moving into the suburbs.” Ongoing concerns about visitors’ behaviors and an increase in crime in local communities were expressed by members of the Albion focus group. Among the observations was the following remark: “We’ve made arrests, drug arrests, gun arrests of people coming to visit the prison. They go in the prison with dope in their pockets...and they have drugs in their cars when they come and visit [inmates].”

Safety Concerns

Focus group members in two of the communities (Albion and Dallas) expressed fears related to prison security and the possibility of escapes. In particular, one group member in Albion described concerns related to the homogeneity of the prototypical prison design: The only downside to this prison is, when they were building this one with the other four or five [prototypical prisons], they were cookie cutter jobs. So if I happened to get housed in Houtzdale...for a few years and I understood how the system worked there, as soon as I got here [in Albion] I knew exactly how everything worked here. [The inmate] knows that this door and this door work together [and recognizes] “If that one [door] pops as I’m running out, by the time I take two more steps, that one slides too and I’m out.” Although at the time of data collection SCI Albion had no record of inmate escapes, one Albion focus group member seemed convinced that an escape at some future point would likely occur, noting, “[A]n unfortunate reality is [it’s] probably inevitable that one day someone will escape.” An escape from SCI Dallas raised some group members’ concern about the possibility of future escapes. One Dallas group member remarked, “I think there was some fear about the security. You know, are we going to have prisoners breaking out and roaming around in a rural area and breaking into your house at night?”

Lack of Input Solicited from Community Prior to Prison Opening

In three of the communities (Cambridge Springs, Dallas, and Houtzdale), focus group members expressed dissatisfaction regarding what they perceived as a lack of communication on the part of the DOC with local communities prior to opening the prisons. Albion was an exception because, at the local level, community members developed a comprehensive written plan and lobbied actively for construction of the prison. The lack of community input from the other three communities, however, was apparent in the following group member’s comment: “[I would have liked to have seen] more public input into putting a prison in, establishing a prison. Let the people know and basically let them decide if they want it or not.”

Lack of Ongoing/Consistent Communication/Information

Focus-group members from three of the prison communities (Cambridge Springs, Dallas, and Houtzdale) identified a lack of ongoing communication between the prison and local community as problematic. Focus-group members expressed their belief that the DOC should take greater initiative in communicating with the local communities. In particular, community members expressed interest in learning more about the release process; in establishing a working relationship with prison administrators (i.e., superintendents and deputy superintendents); and in establishing ongoing communication between prison administrators and local officials, local police and fire departments, and water and sewer authority personnel. An example of focus group members’ attitudes about the lack of ongoing communication was reflected in the following remark: “It’s not like the superintendent calls and they’re [sic] a member of the community when they move into the house up there on the knoll. . . . You don’t see them or hear from them unless you’re up in that area.”

Attitudes Displayed by DOC Employees in the Community

Members of two of the four focus groups (Cambridge Springs and Houtzdale) expressed concerns about the public behavior of DOC employees. One complaint centered on the arrogant attitudes displayed by some DOC employees. In describing some DOC employees’ arrogant or rude behavior, one group member suggested that uniformed DOC employees displayed an attitude of entitlement in public settings. A group member also remarked that DOC employees were the “most arrogant and ignorant people” that law enforcement personnel encounter. Also noted was a disregard for traffic laws by some correctional officers: “One problem they have up there [at the prison], the prison guards do not stop at that stop sign when they come out at six o’clock in the morning.” In the two groups in which employee attitudes were cited as problematic, there was consensus that the demeanor of DOC employees in the community can greatly influence the type of relationship the prison establishes and maintains with members of a rural community.

Perception of the Prisons' Economic Impact on Local Communities

Employment Opportunities

There was consensus among focus group members in all four communities that the prisons had generated employment. It was noted, however, that many prison employees do not reside near the prison. One focus group member remarked: The thing that happened in Albion that we didn't realize was going to happen is Corrections Officers do not want to live right near the prison. There's a few that live [in Albion] but, for the most part, they drive that half an hour or so [to and from work]. Concern about the limited number of local people employed by the prison was reflected in a comment made by another group member: If we'd have a lot more people move to our area that would have been locally working up [at SCI Houtzdale], we would have more dress shops opening, we would have more restaurants, we would have more grocery stores. You can go out any given street in town and see For Sale signs on all these homes. Somebody isn't buying them [*sic*].

On the other hand, the opportunity for a community member to earn a reasonable income at the prison was noted by a group member who offered the following: Number one, the big thing that we want, that we were seeking, is jobs and job enhancement. I think that we have probably, in the immediate area, 100 people out of 600 [employees] working [at the prison]. And the payroll isn't shabby; it's not minimum wage and it's not as high as perhaps some of the skilled union wages might be, but guards there make anywhere [*sic*] from the low 30s to the high 40s. Not a shabby job, not for the Albion area. So that's helped economically. In reference to employment opportunities in the rural areas, group members in two of the focus groups (Cambridge Springs and Dallas) mentioned new jobs that became available. As one focus group member put it, I referenced the neighbors right around me that have gotten jobs that are definitely an economic benefit. My daughter was an intern [during] her senior year in the superintendent's office [and] got paid to do that as a senior in high school...that's an economic benefit. That wouldn't have happened if there wasn't a prison [located there].

Despite opportunities for employment in the prison, members of the Cambridge Springs, Dallas, and Houtzdale focus groups expressed concerns that jobs were not always made available to local residents or that local residents were placed in lower-paying jobs. Group members' comments reflecting this concern included the following: My perception is that some of the lower-paying jobs go to people in the Borough of Cambridge Springs. The higher-paying jobs go to people who are transplants and who don't necessarily move into the borough. I see some pretty nice vehicles pulling into Cambridge every morning that don't have [the names of] local dealerships on [them].

Community Work Programs²

The response expressed with regard to Community Work Programs was very favorable across all four communities. Group members' positive perceptions of the Community Work Program were indicated in the following comment: "It's a good program; the people they send down there [to the local municipalities and the school district. [It's] kinda [*sic*] like getting free labor." worksite] to do work . . . do a good job, they're knowledgeable. And it really helps the

Economic Impact on Local Businesses

In Cambridge Springs, group members' comments suggested that, although initially some community residents were led to believe that local businesses would benefit from the prison, such benefits did not materialize or, at best, have been marginal. Several Cambridge Springs focus group members remarked that the economic benefits were not clearly defined by the DOC and have been equally difficult to measure. For example, one group member noted, I know when [the prison] need[s] a weed whacker, they go down to Hendrickson's [hardware store] and pick one up when they don't have time to wait for a state contract, . . . so there are some sale types of things . . . I don't think it's overwhelming . . . or we don't really know. Group members in Dallas and Houtzdale expressed the perception that surrounding areas were perhaps deriving greater economic benefit from prison employees than were the towns in which the prisons were located because employees bypassed local businesses to shop elsewhere.

² The DOC Community Work Program allows select inmates to work in local communities on projects such as highway clean up, local park clean up and landscaping, and custodial work for churches (for example, refer to Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, SCI Cambridge Springs Web site: <http://www.cor.pa.gov/Facilities/StatePrisons/Pages/Cambridge-Springs.aspx#>).

The lack of business generated by prison employees in local areas was reflected in the following remark: “[At SCI Dallas] a shift worker does his shift and goes back home. [The shift worker] doesn’t spend money [in the local area].” Group members in Cambridge Springs and Houtzdale described the dilemma faced by local businesses when they try to compete with large retail chains in supplying goods to the prison. Group members in these two areas also indicated that they perceived the bid process, used by the DOC to control costs, as an obstacle to local businesses. The following statement expressed that perception: The Department of Corrections held in Albion a meeting session of all parties interested in perhaps supplying some type of product or good[s] to the prison so they could bid on it, and I think hundreds of people came to that. [The DOC] gave everyone, at first, the opportunity to believe that they had a real solid chance of participating and I think they truly believed it themselves. But after it got moving forward, that’s not what happened. And the reason it’s not happened, or didn’t happen, is because you got the mega Walmarts up the road. There’s no way you can compete with them.

Real Estate/Property Values

In three of the local areas (Albion, Cambridge Springs, and Dallas), group members noted that the prison had had a positive impact on real estate values. The opinion that the prison had not had a negative impact and, in some cases, had positively affected real estate values, was reflected in one group member’s comment: [As a result of the prison] . . . 600 more people are now looking to buy a home that weren’t even considering it [before the prison opened]. I don’t think there’s anything *unpositive* about it. It can’t be too bad because they’re putting a lot of high-class building lots over on the other side of Penn State and I think they’re getting good prices . . . they’re not too far from the prison. I think it’s an advantage. The prison’s impact on real estate values seemed to be most pronounced in the Cambridge Springs area, as reflected in the following group member’s comment: “You have people getting higher rent and the increase in property value has doubled. I remember selling a house probably 8 years ago for \$25,000 . . . Four years later, I sold it for \$48,000. That’s [a] pretty good investment.” In the Cambridge Springs focus group, participants’ remarks suggested that the housing market was not affected by the prison initially, but within several years of the opening of the prison there was an increase in the sale of homes and a noticeable increase in property values. In the Albion area, arrangements were made with the DOC to construction around between the prison and the adjacent highway. The mound created a physical barrier that made the prison less visible in the community. Group members seemed to agree that this decreased visibility of the prison also decreased adverse effects that the prison might otherwise have had on real estate values. One Albion group member commented, “I think what really helped the prison out there, especially with the properties out in my area, is the mound.”

Traffic Concerns/Burden on Local Police Departments

In three of the rural areas (Albion, Cambridge Springs, and Houtzdale), group members described traffic concerns related to the prison as well as an additional burden prisons have created for local police departments. These concerns were noted in the following group members’ remarks: [The prison] came in and probably doubled or tripled the police department’s work, but all the money from the tax goes to Woodward Township and doesn’t do us a bit of good. The big semis [tractor-trailers] going up and down [the road] and the prison vans from Philadelphia County, and wherever else, that you see in the morning are putting extra stress on your [our] roads.

Water and Sewage Treatment Concerns

In Albion and Dallas, focus group members suggested that, because the prisons are part of their communities, the DOC could help alleviate the financial strain placed on water and sewage systems in local municipalities. In Dallas, it was suggested that a cooperative relationship between the township and the DOC could lead to an expanded waste and water treatment plant that could benefit the prison as well as the local community. Group members’ thoughts in this regard were reflected in the following comment: Jackson Township is under duress right now in terms of their development in having adequate sewage treatment . . . [P]art of the solution could be with the prison. And that would definitely help offset some things. Jackson Township would receive a portion of that revenue. Comments made by Albion focus group members about sewage treatment concerns suggest that, by working more closely with local municipalities and being cognizant of local issues, the DOC could better support the community.

Impact on Local fire Departments

A final theme that emerged came from the focus groups in Cambridge Springs and Dallas and related to the prisons’ use of services provided by local fire departments.

According to group members, because the prison relies on local fire departments, the DOC should provide financial support for these services. The following comment highlights concerns regarding the prisons' use of local fire department services: "[The prison] is a bit of a drain on the volunteer fire and ambulance." As with concerns about water and sewage treatment issues in the local areas, focus group members' feedback suggests that the DOC could play a significant role in partnering with the community to support local resources and that such a role could ultimately serve to improve the prison-community relationship.

Conclusions

The focus group interviews revealed participants' views on issues related to the prison-community relationship and the prisons' economic impact on their host communities. Several important themes could be discerned in the group members' comments, and these themes, as they relate to the goals of the larger study, are summarized in Appendix C. Community focus group participants expressed concerns about the effects of undesirable visitors to their communities (e.g., unwelcome behavior and increased crime). These worries ranged from negative impacts of inmates' family and friends spending time in the community to concerns that these individuals might relocate to the community. Although these concerns can be very real (Martin & Myers, 2005; Shichor, 1992), such concerns among community residents may be based more on perception, and perhaps fear, than on reality. With the exception of one community's focus group, participants expressed dissatisfaction regarding a perceived lack of communication on the part of the DOC. Participants believed the DOC failed to solicit enough input from community members and that there was a lack of opportunity for formal communication during the siting process. Focus group members expressed concerns that information was spread informally, through rumors, which led to increased fear and uncertainty regarding the new prison. Such a finding speaks volumes to the importance of having an open and transparent siting process whereby information is readily shared with community residents and their questions and concerns are addressed by siting officials.

Three of the four community focus groups identified a lack of ongoing communication (post-siting) as problematic. Participants (community leaders) in these groups divulged that they had not met with new administrators of their local SCI. This concern seemed particularly strong in locations where there had been a recent change in prison administration. Focus group participants also expressed interest in learning more about the release process, in establishing a working relationship with local prison administrators, and in establishing and enhancing communication between the prison and local officials, police and fire departments, and water and sewer authority personnel. To be sure, communication seems to be a critical factor in the overall health of the prison-community relationship, both at the time of siting a prison and thereafter (Martin, 2000). Communication obviously requires the participation of at least two parties, and this case study showed that both prison management and community residents could be more involved in the process.

This study revealed that all four prisons were very active in providing work/labor to their surrounding communities, and it was clear that focus group participants viewed this involvement favorably. Two different types of prison work crews were being used: Community Work Programs (CWPs) and the Operation Outward Reach (OOR) program. When given a chance to offer additional comments or remarks on the mail survey component of the study, many residents mentioned the work that the inmates did in this regard as a positive contribution.³ Positive feelings of this sort were also expressed by community focus group participants, something that few, if any, researchers have examined previously. Clearly, such "free labor" can go a long way toward improving or maintaining the overall health of the prison-community relationship. Last among the findings, but perhaps most important, was that the four community focus groups all believed that the prisons had generated employment opportunities. Although expressing some concerns that prison employees did not all reside near the prisons, that jobs were not always made available to local residents, and that locals who did find employment at the prisons were placed in lower-paying jobs, the belief that the prison was responsible for job creation in their communities was evident. Although recognizing the negative findings of previously completed studies regarding the economic contribution of prisons (Besser & Hanson, 2004; Gilmore, 2007; Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo, & Lobao, 2004; Huling, 2002; King et al., 2002), the authors heed the words of Swanson (1997), who suggested that the positive economic impact of a prison can trump the other potentially negative effects.

³Some residents also mentioned this work as a negative in the sense that the inmates, or "free labor," were taking jobs away from the other (perhaps law-abiding) citizens/residents, although these types of comments were rare.

Given these findings, it seems clear that the *perception* of these economic contributions, at least in terms of job creation, may be more important than other, more objective measures.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Attendance

Community	Total Attendees/ Invited Participants	Attendee Occupations*
Albion	6 / 18	Local public official
		Local clergy representative
		Representative, PA State Police – Girard Barracks
		Local realtor
		Representatives of two local banks
Cambridge Springs	5 / 14	Local realtor
		Local government representative
		Volunteer Fire Department representative
		Two local borough public officials
Dallas	8 / 25	Two local bank representatives
		Three local government officials
		Public official from the local borough
		Two local realtors
Houtzdale	6 / 26	Two public officials, local borough
		Representative, local borough
		Local high school representative
		Representative, local American Legion
		Local clergy representative

*Details regarding occupational titles were omitted to ensure each focus group participant's anonymity.

Appendix B

Focus Group Standardized Questions

Index Card / Ice Breaker Questions (work titles only – no names)

1. What are the *advantages* of the prison being located in your community?
2. What are the *disadvantages* of the prison being located in your community?

Questions with Probes

1. (Depending upon the age of the prison) How did you first become aware that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) had interest in building (or opening) a prison in your community?
2. (Depending upon the age of the prison) What was your initial reaction when you learned that the PADOC planned to build (or open) a prison in your community?
3. (Depending upon the age of the prison) In what way did the PADOC solicit your input about building (or opening) a prison in your community?
4. In general, how do you feel about the prison being located here?
5. What economic benefits have occurred as a result of the prison having opened (or being in) your community? [Might the local *Chambers of Commerce* and/or real estate professionals have data/information measuring these economic benefits...?]
6. Have there ever been issues or concerns from members of the community regarding inmate visitation, i.e., people coming to the area to visit inmates?
7. What kind of (ongoing) communication does the PADOC have with you and/or the community about the prison or issues concerning the prison? In your opinion, how important is communication between the prison and its surrounding community?
8. If you were tasked by the DOC with establishing a new prison site, what steps would you take to accomplish a smooth and transparent integration of the facility into the community?

Probe: As a follow-up to question 8 above, sometimes, the number of prison employees who live in the immediate local area is identified as a concern among some local residents and business owners. Might there be anything the community and/or government can do to attract and/or retain more local residents/employees of the prison?

Appendix C

Focus Group Themes

Themes / Findings	# of groups identifying this as an issue (N=4)
Issues Related to Family/Friends Visiting the Prison	
Concern that families of inmates (so called “camp followers”) would relocate within close proximity to the prison (an unwanted situation in the community)	4
Unwanted/unfamiliar people visiting local areas (i.e., people with criminal records)	4
Increase in crime and arrest rate	3
Lack of Input Solicited from the Community Prior to Prison Opening	
Misconceptions about the prison on the part of community members	3
Belief that the prison siting in local area was a “done deal” without community input	3
Lack of communication with the local community	3
Lack of Ongoing/Consistent Communication	
Lack of initiative on part of DOC to communicate with community	3
Lack of initiative on part of DOC to establish relationship with local officials (i.e., Borough Council members, police departments, etc.)	3

Safety Concerns	
Fears related to prison security/escapes	2
Fears related to break-ins	2
Safety of children	2
Attitudes of DOC Employees	
Arrogant/rude attitudes displayed by DOC employees	2
Attitude of entitlement displayed by uniformed DOC employees	2
Workforce Issues	
Job creation (positive economic impact)	4
Prison staffed by employees who were brought in from the outside (i.e., transfers from other prisons)	3
Local residents employed by prison given lower-paying jobs	3
Value of Community Work Programs (Free Labor)	4
Economic Impact on Local Businesses	
Local businesses not always able to benefit because of bidding process used by DOC	2
Unclear economic impact	2
Lack of local buying by prison employees	2
Local vendors unable to compete with large retail chains such as Wal-Mart	2
Real Estate/Property Values	
Increase in property values	3
Increase in sale of homes over the course of time	3
Ministry Opportunities	2
Traffic Concerns/Burden on Public Services	
Increased work for police department	3
Need for support of local fire department	2
Increase in traffic violations as a result of DOC employees disregarding traffic laws	2
Infrastructure Issues	
Lack of cooperation in resolving water and sewer treatment issues	3
Stress on roadways due to tractor-trailers traveling to and from the prison	1