

## **Jail guards strained, chief says**

### **Officials say facility's design makes dealing with overcrowding difficult**

**By Dick Cook Staff Writer**

Hamilton County Jail Chief Jim Hart receives a report every day on how many inmates are in jail, but one of the best indications of overcrowding is written on the faces of his corrections officers, he said.

"Stand on the steps of the jail during shift change and look at the eyes of the officers who are getting off shift," Chief Hart said. "You will see that they are physically and mentally whipped."

According to jail records, the average number of inmates housed inside the 25-yearold, six-story building during November was 657. Nov. 25 and 26 had the highest number of inmates with 677, but by Nov. 28 that number had dropped to a monthly low of 624.

The Hamilton County Jail is supposed to have a maximum capacity of 489, and officials are looking for ways to reduce the regular population to that number. Chief Hart said in the five years he's been in charge of the jail, there have been just two days when it was not over capacity.

### **A "MIXED POT"**

**OF INMATES** Chief Hart, a retired U.S. Marine Corps correctional officer, said there is a "mixed pot" of inmates in the jail, including the elderly, violent offenders, nonviolent offenders, repeat offenders and juveniles being booked for the first time.

The different groups "must be kept segregated," he said. The Hamilton County Jail is intended to house people awaiting trial. On Nov. 1, there were 243 inmates accused of felony crimes in the facility, and 60 who were accused of misdemeanors who couldn't make bail. There were 136 prisoners in the facility facing federal charges, officials said.

"The felons are waiting to be bound over by the grand jury," Chief Hart said. "Typically they will be in jail longer because the trial process takes longer."

Jail records show the average length of stay in jail for a person accused of a felony is 65 days. But that number doesn't tell jail administrators very much, Chief Hart said.

"Some are in a matter of days, which blows the average," he said. "Some have been here a year."

Hamilton County District Attorney General Bill Cox said prosecutors are doing everything possible to speed justice along. "Our constant goal is to get cases to trial as rapidly as possible," he said.

Mr. Cox said prosecutors from his office present evidence to the grand jury involving inmates before the cases of people accused of crimes who are out on bond.

The office has hired a parttime secretary to assist in preparing indictments, further reducing the amount of time a person sits in the jail before trial, he said. Mr. Cox said 65 days for an average stay in the jail before a felony trial "doesn't seem that long."

"We're doing everything we can to dispose of cases as quickly as possible, while at the same time ensuring that nobody's rights are violated," he said. To reduce the jail population, Chief Hart said he has reviewed the cases of some inmates accused of misdemeanors who are unable to make bail and taken them before a judge.

"We would select a case and go before the court and ask for a bond reduction or sentence for time served," Chief Hart said. "We would print out a criminal history. Some of them have three pages, and it's hard to justify release."

**PROBLEMS INSIDE** Corey Abernathy, 26, spent 14 months in the jail on charges he broke into a car and stole a radio. He was unable to make a \$4,500 bond. Even with a reduced bond, he couldn't raise the \$100 needed to gain his freedom until trial, he said.

Officials said it's not uncommon for the bond of nonviolent offenders who are not a flight risk to be reduced to try to relieve overcrowding. Crowded conditions often increase tensions among inmates, according to Chief Hart.

Mr. Abernathy, who was released from jail Nov. 1, said he spent much of his time on the sixth floor in a four-man cell. He said while in jail he was involved in three fights.

"A bunch of my troubles came because I wasn't more verbal," said Mr. Abernathy, who is homeless after getting out of jail. "I put in a request to have my own cell in isolation. I wanted to study the Bible."

Officials said the Hamilton County Jail's linear design makes it difficult for the current number of corrections officers to monitor inmates. Each floor has an east and a west wing with a control station staffed by a correctional officer at the midpoint, making it "hard to work," Chief Hart said.

"The problem is the control station has no visibility of the inmates," he said.

Every day the prisoners must be fed, given access to jail programs and often taken to the courts for hearings. Inmates have access to more than two dozen programs, ranging from church services to adult basic education classes, officials said.

"All this movement requires manpower," Chief Hart said. "Plus, you're dealing with criminals, so you can expect criminal behavior."

**DESIGN OF THE JAIL** On the first floor of the jail are intake and booking sections. People accused of breaking the law are booked, their valuables are taken for storage and paperwork is sent to General Sessions Court, officials said.

"On some nights this place gets to rocking and rolling," said Cliff Bench, one of five officers who work the area.

If a person can't make bond, he is put in a holding cell, officials said.

"The holding cells are designed to hold prisoners between four and eight hours," Chief Hart said. "In reality, (most) people are here five to seven days."

On Nov. 14, 80 inmates were housed in the holding cells. "That's the lowest it's been in a while," Chief Hart said.

Also on the first floor, jail cook Jimmy Hughes' kitchen fills the air with the smell of freshly baked bread. Mr. Hughes has help from inmates to prepare hundreds of thousands of meals each year at an average cost of 69 cents per meal.

"I wish they would weigh the inmates when they come in here and then again when they leave and give me a dollar for every pound they've gained," Mr. Hughes said.

Locked behind a glass case are the kitchen utensils, including a long-bladed butcher knife. Mr. Hughes said in the seven years he's worked in the kitchen, there's never been a crime committed with the knife.

Officials said about 50 current inmates require special diets for medical or religious reasons. A half floor up from the kitchen is an area known as the "quarter deck."

There are four single holding cells for high-risk prisoners or inmates in protective custody, officials said. That's also where inmates being moved to another facility are placed temporarily, they said.

The second floor of the jail is for minimum-security inmates, officials said. There are 127 inmates and three guards on the floor. On Nov. 14, inmates were sitting at tables playing dominoes or cards, paying little attention to visitors touring the facility.

The third floor is made up of two-man cells, officials said. "It's the only area of the jail you won't see full," Chief Hart said. "The reason is this is a lockdown area with high-profile inmates."

The men on this floor are allowed one hour out of their cells during first shift and one hour during second shift, he said. The fourth floor is where prisoners with special medical or mental health needs are kept, officials said. On Nov. 14, 92 men were staying on that floor.

There also is a clinic on the floor for medical and dental care of inmates. Chief Hart said the county hired Erlanger hospital to provide the medical services. "Forty-five to 50 percent of the inmates receive medications of some kind," Chief Hart said. The fifth and sixth floors are identical in layout, officials said. There are about 125 inmates housed on each floor. Major felons are housed on the fifth floor.

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## Hamilton County Jail statistics

On Nov. 1, 622 inmates were in the Hamilton County Jail. At the end of the month, 402 still were there. Below is a breakdown of those prisoners.

Status	Nov. 1	Dec. 1	Still in jail
Pre-trial felony	238	168	58%
Post-trial felony	36	18	50%
Federal inmates	147	123	80%
Post-trial misdemeanor	67	38	57%
Pre-trial misdemeanor	61	12	20%
Probation violation, felony	58	28	52%
Probation violation, misdemeanor	11	5	45%
Parole violations and other charges	44	10	23%

SOURCE: HAMILTON COUNTY JAIL. STAFF GRAPHIC BY LAURA E. WALKER

### Justice logjam



Sunday  
*Scope of the problem*

Today  
*Who's in the jail?*

Tuesday  
*Possible solutions*

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**INSIDE**

Some inmates in jail for a while, A6

### Taking part

A number of programs are offered for inmates in the Hamilton County Jail. Below is a breakdown of inmate participation:

Program	2001	2002
Adult Basic Education	229	198
GED graduates	24	0
Juvenile Basic Education	74	60
Alcohol & drug class	422	745
Muslim services	143	306
Bible study	2,418	1,071
Sunday worship services	11,500	11,455
Anger management class	441	582
Discipleship class	699	742
Life skills	118	0
LTC literacy program	283	105
Fathers class	115	96
Counselor interviews	2,237	1,592
Case manager interviews	507	517
Group therapy	186	207
Juvenile group	186	90

Hispanic religious services	585	572
Teen Challenge	296	454
Emmaus Walk	25	25
Post Emmaus Walk	10	87
Sunday school	288	772
Art program	12	42
Catholic Mass	0	384
Chattanooga Endeavors	0	72
Hispanic alcohol and drug class	0	49
Juvenile Bible study	0	105
Conflict resolution	0	121
Transformation Project (November 2002)		0
<b>Total inmates accessing programs</b>	<b>20,800</b>	<b>20,460 (through Oct. 30)</b>

SOURCE: HAMILTON COUNTY JAIL OFFICIALS

STAFF GRAPHIC BY LAURA E. WALKER

