Discussions of America's local jails inevitably center around their plethora of problems. Not only are these problems pervasive, but they are also enduring. Numerous proposals have been advanced to improve jail conditions and operations. Most have failed to such an extent that some scholars have speculated that jails are simply immune to reform.

It is the contention of this article that most of the problems facing contemporary jails are rooted in the unique political nature of the jail as an organization. Consequently, serious efforts to affect change in jail conditions must recognize the limited options placed upon jail reforms by the political environment, or they must originate from outside the local political setting.

American jails have been called everything from "festerling sores," to "cesspools of crime," to "teeming houses of horror". They are recognized as serving as "dumping grounds," "human warehouses," "catchall asylums," and "the ultimate ghetto". Simply put, they have been labelled "a national disgrace".

Such vernacular would not be so alarming if jails were an unimportant and inconsequential part of the criminal justice system. But jails are the most important part of the correction system, (Goldfarb, 1975, p. 12) serving as key filtering points for the estimated 6.3 million people who are processed through them in a single year (Kerle and Ford, 1982, p. 72). It is indeed ironic that in a period of limited government resources (which invariably translates into extremely limited resources for corrections), prisons appear to be faring much better than local jails despite the fact that "more offenders pass through U.S. jails in a single year than have been confined in our nation's prisons over the past decade" (Cox,
1982, p. 81). Yet our jails are far worse than our prisons (Goldfarb, p. 5).

Despite their importance, jails "have been little studied, and widely misunderstood" (Goldfarb, p. 1). Some of the problems that continue to plague jails are well-known; others are not and continue to impede well-intentioned efforts to improve the conditions of our jails. The purpose of this paper is to review these problems, and speculate as to the prospects of jail reform. It is the central thesis of this work that the myriad of problems that face jails essentially are rooted in the unique political nature of the jail as an organization, and that any efforts to implement change must understand and work within this political environment and organizational context.

PROBLEMS

The problems of jails are legion. Among these problems are those associated with physical facilities, personnel, and public attitudes. Physical Facilities. A large majority of jails in the U.S. experience problems in their operating procedures because of either (a) the age of the structure or (b) the poor design of the facility.

a. Age. A recent survey by the National Sheriff's Association found that over 12 percent of U.S. jails still in use were built before the 20th century. Over 41 percent of all jails are over 55 years old (Kerle and Ford, p. 38). One New England state is currently operating three jails that are over 160 years old. A county in North Carolina continued to use its 18th century jail until 1975. Only after the county secured federal urban development funds was the archaic facility replaced with a new one.

Antiquated jails designed in a bygone era can have a severe impact on the security and operations of the facility. In many cases the "bull pen" design of earlier jails preclude inmate classification and administrative segregation, limit visitation and attorney conferences, and promote disruptive behavior that threatens overall security. Unfortunately, renovations to existing structures (a less expensive alternative to new construction) cannot eliminate basic flaws and simply creates a hodge-podge design. To relieve overcrowding, separate structures are sometimes built but they require more personnel to operate and create a security nightmare. For example, one such two part