

CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT
21st CENTURY – USA

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CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS AND STAFF

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Delving into the past we often find striking similarities to situations in the present. In the wake of the Attica (New York) Penitentiary riot in 1971, the social structure of American prisons changed drastically around the issues of race and the prisoner rights movement. Today, the racial demographics of the American prison population once again mirror deeper social problems, problems that correctional agencies and correctional staff are increasingly being asked to address. Moreover, the massive re-emergence of contractual private-for-profit prisons raises important new questions about the purpose and scope of incarceration in the United States.

Other problems such as overcrowding, gang activities, institutional violence, forced overtime, complexity of operational technology, and insufficient training are listed as key factors in the increasing work-related stress of Correctional Officers. In this sense, many officers and staff feel that correctional work is more stressful now than ever before. The modern correctional environment, no matter whether by choice or circumstance, confines both its employees and the inmates.

Principally members of the social and economic underclass constitute the contemporary inmate population; these are often people with acute nutritional, developmental, neurological, and mental and general health problems. Primarily minorities and women, typically they have had little or no previous access to consistent health care services. Thus making them prone to a wide range of communicable diseases such as substance abuse and drug addiction, sexually transmitted disease groups (STDs), hepatitis, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and a full range of psychological health problems. Practical information has led in recent years to efforts that seek to identify bases for assisting staff in classifying and treating high-risk from low-risk offenders. In this respect, the value of policy-relevant research has become increasingly apparent to first-line officers and staff.

As a major factor in American life, the corrections system can no longer survive as a closed system but instead needs to be able to anticipate change and respond rapidly to fluctuating resources, demographics and demands. The bi-polar prison of the past has been transformed into modern-day, and complex tri-polar prison consisting of inmates, officers, and administration now drawn together in the interplay of new generation custodial exigencies. Moreover, the concerns of both internal employees and external communities must also be accommodated. There is an emergent and important awareness of the organizational development of modern prisons. Specifically, the conditions-of-confinement for inmates, and thus the conditions-of-work for Correctional Officers and staff, provide the vital framework for building a workforce that better serves the mission of modern corrections – maintaining secure, safe, and humane correctional facilities.

NEW DIRECTIONS

The Attica uprising made it abundantly clear that the Correctional Officers and staff of the nation's state and local correctional facilities were not being appropriately selected and trained. At that turbulent time, the prison was viewed from the perspective of society, inmates, administration, scholars, victims, or from a philosophical standpoint. Rarely, if at all, were the views of Correctional Officers and staff included in these perspectives. Nonetheless, the American civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s was destined to permeate the prison walls and to profoundly effect both the keeper and the kept. In the prisons, it was the Black Muslims who carried the torch of black protest behind the prison walls.

The Attica uprising also added considerable impetus to the nascent prisoner rights movement. However, the new prisoner rights movement was not comprised solely of prisoners. It depended heavily on the involvement and efforts of free citizens, particularly lawyers and reinvigorated prison reform groups. Heretofore, the federal judiciary had adhered to a "hands off" attitude toward prison cases out of concern for federalism and separation of powers. The ensuing cases that served to reverse this judicial "hands off" purview have permanently altered both the legal status of inmates and Correctional Officers and staff. They serve as the primogeniture of modern penology. [See: *Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539 (1974); *Dothard v. Rawlison*, 433 U.S. 321 (1977); *Bell v. Wolfish*, 520 (1979); *Ruiz v. Estelle*, 503 F.Supp. 1265 (S.D. Tex. 1980); *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337 (1981).]

In the throes of these dynamic times, the Correctional Officer became at last a legitimate subject of scholarly research and interest. David Fogel's *We are the Living Proof*, Leo Carroll's *Hacks, Blacks and Cons*, James B. Jacobs' *Stateville: The Penitentiary in Mass Society*, Lucien Lombardo's *Guards Imprisoned: Correctional Officers at Work*, Robert Johnson and Shelly Price, *The Complete Correctional Officer, Human Service and the Human Environment of Prison*, and Lynn Zimmer's, *Women Guarding Men* are hallmarks of the early scholarly research on the Correctional officer. In fact, the very term "Correctional Officer" was adopted during the 1970s as the official occupational reference term utilized by the U.S. Department of Labor replacing the archaic denomination of "Keeper" and "Guard." Today there is a growing and viable interest in further developing an appropriate role for Correctional Officers and staff.

The job of the Correctional Officer has remained essentially the same for the past 150 years: care, custody and control. The preferred ways of performing this job, however, have undergone considerable stress and role definition in the development of modern penology. The occupation Correctional Officer is now available to both men and women, and officially established with defined by rules and regulations (Civil Rights Act, Title VII, as Amended - 1972).

Formal oversight is given to the recruitment and qualifications for employment and the hiring system itself, especially as it involves civil service exams, the use of merit boards, or direct hiring by institutions. A specific hiring process has profound effect on the retention of Correctional Officers. Likewise, the matters of entry salary, increments, overtime and hazardous duty pay, pension plans, and recognition as public safety "peace officer" status by state law also shapes the process of recruitment and long-term retention.

CARE, CUSTODY, AND CONTROL

Where do correctional officers and staff come from? What are their social and occupational aspirations? How are they selected, nurtured, and trained to perform their duties? How are they socialized into the occupation of Correctional Officer? What is the influence of the occupational culture on the individual officer? These are some of the most compelling questions guiding the research on men and women correctional staff both in the United States and globally.

Correctional Officers and staff ensure the public safety by providing for the care, custody, control, and maintenance of inmates. Most institutions require that Correctional Officers be at least 18 years or 21 years of age, have a high school education or its equivalent, have no felony convictions, and be a United States citizen. As with the police, many correctional departments are placing greater emphasis on bachelor and master degree attainment in the hiring and promotional process. Institutions of higher education are developing specific correctional degree programs, especially at the master degree level.

Correctional Officers are charged with overseeing individuals who have been arrested, are awaiting trial or other hearing, or who have been convicted of a crime and sentenced to serve time in a jail, reformatory, or penitentiary. They maintain security and observe inmate conduct and behavior to prevent disturbances and escapes. The more general duties of Correctional Officers and staff require them to manage and communicate with inmates, peers and supervisors, direct inmate movement, maintain key, tool, and equipment control, distribute authorized items to inmates, as well as maintain health, safety, and sanitation.

Federal, State and local departments of corrections provide training for correctional officers based on standards and guidelines promulgated by the American Correctional Association, the American Jail Association, and the National Sheriffs Association. Among the numerous demands on the special training Correctional Officers have to undergo, the development of interpersonal communication skills have become the life-blood of effective Correctional Officer performance. This includes the capacity to understand the full range of inmate (verbal and nonverbal) modes of communication: the culture, the slang, the signals, the threat, and the fear that abounds.

Correctional Officer and staff training programs include a wide array of instruction. Typical training topics are: constitutional law and cultural awareness, inmate behavior, contraband control, custody and security procedures; fire and safety; inmate legal rights, written and oral communication, use-of-force, first aid, including cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and physical fitness training.

ECOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE

The correctional facility itself serves as a tangible frame of reference for orienting new staff and maintaining standards of performance for both new and incumbent staff. The architectural design and built-environment of correctional facilities, both traditional and new generation facilities, govern the interactions of all people – inmates and staff – within the confines of prison walls.

These physical plant features are often conducive to the development of the training process providing innovative resources for on-the-job training, field applications, simulation, and emergency preparedness training. Conversely, the physical plant uniquely defines the requirements of custodial regimentation, the institutional security level, the inmate classification system, and the deployment of correctional staff (officers and support personnel).

The fact that Correctional Officers are *locked-in* and *unarmed* as they maintain daily custodial control is perceived only as an occupational responsibility. Moreover, the simple fact that correctional officers cannot walk away from a confrontation or crisis within the institutional setting is often overlooked. Thus, proper training and deployment of correctional officers, including the proper mix of new and seasoned officers, is of paramount importance.

The deployment of the Correctional Officer workforce has also been directly affected by overcrowding. The development of custodial control mechanisms and classification systems are increasingly correlated for the containment of institutional violence. Accurate, aggressive and highly flexible inmate classification is crucial to institutional safety and inmate welfare. In this context, custodial control is not unlike the current initiatives to reinvent law enforcement through community policing programs, thus enabling both officers and inmates to perceive the mutuality of their safety concerns.

The level of tension in a prison only rarely reflects the relative comfort of physical facilities or the number and extent of vocational and recreational programs; almost always it is a measure of the ability of the corrections staff to supervise and interact with inmates firmly and fairly. Correctional Officers are in a unique position because, by the nature of their job, they know the inmates and have perceptions of the inmates' treatment needs. Historically, limitations were placed on the Correctional Officer by their inherently limited role created in the juxtaposition among professions. Correctional Officers were not encouraged to exercise discretion. Until recently, the counselors and program staff were often not interested in receiving the input of Correctional Officers.

In the last decade both Correctional Officers and staff training programs have developed a core body of knowledge for inmate-contact positions. These roles are now becoming more diffused through the implementation of Unit Management and Special Housing Units within correctional facilities. Such programs require officers and staff to utilize a triage approach to care, custody and control of inmates. Topics covered in these core value curricula are:

- ⌘ Inmate population characteristics (including a description of sociological, ethnic and racial, cultural, psychological backgrounds, and differences) and a discussion of inmate sub-cultures.
- ⌘ Inmate population problems, including health difficulties arising from substance abuse, HIV immune-response deficiencies, malnourishment, possible detoxification and emotional difficulties resulting in attempted suicides, severe depression and anti-social and aggressive behavior; education deficiencies.
- ⌘ Basic human relations, including the development of effective communication skills (e.g., listening and non-judgmental speech) and humane methods of control and supervision.
- ⌘ Methods for dealing effectively with crisis and emergency situations.

When contemplating the tenets of care, custody and control, officers and staff must keep in mind that they are constantly being observed by inmates. In this context, it is critical that officers and staff understand they either represent a role model to emulate or to avoid. It is the correctional employees – custody and program staff – who must offer encouragement and help to those inmates who sincerely wish to rehabilitate their lives.

NEW GENERATION TRENDS

The corrections system is a residual agency. Positioned downstream from all other components of the criminal justice system, it often operates under the prey of politicians. The political nature of the correctional systems, reporting to the executive branch of government at the local, state, and federal levels, leaves it vulnerable to a host of external forces, particularly with respect to budget and operational philosophy issues. For example, during the 1990s a strong conservative political camp succeeded in achieving cutbacks in inmate educational and recreational programs and a return to more stringent custodial control, including chain gangs and forced labor. This conservative climate is also putting to the test the viability of centralized training for officers and staff. In many jurisdictions training is under the threat of cost-cutting decisions by conservative budgeteers.

The traditional program staff positions of educators, chaplains, counselors, nurses, doctors, and psychologists are now fully complemented with an array of new generation staff. Many of these new positions are the direct by-products of the prisoner rights movement. These include: law librarians, inmate grievance officers, lawyers, legal aides and paralegal clerks, substance abuse counselors, AIDS counselors, parenting counselors, anger-management counselors, recreation supervisors, nutritionists, environmental health monitors, affirmative action officers, restorative-justice programmers, standards and accreditation officers, public relations officers, lobbyists, construction and contracting officers, private-prison liaison officers, US Office of Safety, Health Administration (OSHA) and collective bargaining administrators.

Additionally, new generation correctional facilities are also identified with corresponding institutional staffing and environmental problems. For example, many such problems are associated with the increasing incorporation of sophisticated cyber-surveillance video-technology and the construction of super-max prisons. Veteran correctional officers and staff are now expressing concerns that these new generation facilities are becoming “incubators” ...sealed prisons... where there is little to no internal human interaction. Communication is done through microphones and wall speakers, while inmate-wristbands trigger door and gate movements and provide access to inmate programs and services. These trends portend extreme psychological deprivation on both sides of the bars.

Today, most American correctional systems are also providing psychological services to Correctional Officers and staff. These programs provide expertise in the areas of job stress, self-image, domestic-violence intervention, and alcohol abuse. In addition, Correctional Officer unions and the courts are intervening where legislatures and prison administrators are unresponsive to enlisting safe and secure working environments as a requirement for a correctional facility’s legal operation (e.g., training, retention and supervision of staff).

CONTEMPORARY WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHICS

In the United States the current national (State and local) correctional workforce is approximately 617,000 officers and program staff. The Federal correctional workforce is approximately 28,500 officers and correctional staff. This does not include the personnel of private-for-profit prisons. At the state level, there is a higher ratio of nonwhite to white Correction Officers mostly in the southern states, with the exception of the District of Columbia (96.8%). On average, women cover 20.5% of the employees in corrections, but the rates vary from as low as 6.6% (Maine) to almost half (49.9%) in Mississippi. The situation is a bit different at the federal level according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999), with only 12.5% women correctional officers and only 38.5% nonwhite employees working in the Federal correctional justice system. The impact of the new generation of mixed-gender and multi-racial staff is having a positive influence on staff-inmate interactions.

Correctional Officers can understand simple fairness and reasonableness better than most people. They must work in a highly distilled environment where such factors are crucial to safety and cooperation. Correctional Officers can also understand the need to build structure to ensure justice. Measuring the inmate’s progress by their lawful behavior is as plausible to correctional officers as is measuring their own work program and upward mobility. The promulgation of the *Correctional Officers’ Creed* by the International Association of Correctional Officers (IACO) illustrates the spirit and elan of this new generation workforce.

CORRECTION OFFICERS' CREED

To speak sparingly...to act, not to argue...to be in authority through personal presence...to correct without nagging...to speak with the calm voice of certainty...to see everything, know what is significant and what not to notice...to be neither insensitive to distress nor so distracted by pity as to miss what must elsewhere be seen...

To do neither that which is unkind nor self-indulgent in its misplaced charity...never to obey the impulse to tongue lash that silent insolence which in times past could receive the lash...to be both firm and fair...to know I cannot be fair simply by being firm, nor firm simply by being fair...

To support the reputations of associates and confront them without anger, should they stand short of professional conduct...to reach for knowledge of the continuing mysteries of human motivation...to think; always to think...to be dependable...to be dependable first to my charges and associates, and thereafter to my duty as employee and citizen...to keep fit...to keep forever alert...to listen to what is meant as well as what is said with words and with silences...

To expect respect from my charges and my superiors yet never to abuse the one for abuses from the other...for eight hours each working day to be an example of the person I could be at all times...to acquiesce in no dishonest act...to cultivate patience under boredom and calm during confusion...to understand the why of every order I take or give...

To hold freedom among the highest values though I deny it to those I guard...to deny it with dignity that in my example they find no reason to lose their dignity...to be prompt...to be honest with all who practice deceit that they not find in me excuse for themselves...to privately face down my fear that I not signal it...to privately cool my anger that I not displace it on others...to hold in confidence what I see and hear, which by the telling could harm or humiliate to no good purpose...to keep my outside problems outside...to leave inside that which should stay inside...to do my duty. **Bob Barrington, Correctional Officers' Creed, *The Keepers' Voice*, 19(2), 1998: 8**

Unlike public safety officers such as police and fire fighters who interact with the public on a daily basis, Correctional Officers and staff operate behind the walls and are, essentially, out of sight and out of mind. Their problems and concerns are rarely a matter of public interest. They find it difficult to lobby for improved salaries, benefits, and working conditions and are often viewed with the same disinterest as the inmates they supervise.

Globally, the correctional occupational field is hungry for professional development and a respected and legitimate identity as a public safety occupation. As in the United States, the inherent political character of prisons in any society both compounds and enlightens these comparisons. In 1979, Foucault noted, the formidable right to punish "concretely" continues to fully influence the management of prisons in all societies. So, too, does the need to establish a principle of moderation for the *power of punishment* through on-going professional training and the establishment of programs for ensuring the well-being of Correctional Officers and staff.

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