

## NIJ UPDATE

# Risky business

## Part 1 of 2 in a series on correctional officer wellness

By National Institute of Justice staff

*Authors' Note: Findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Security and stability in prisons and jails are critical to administer justice, protect the public and ensure the safety of inmates. This responsibility falls heaviest on the shoulders of front-line corrections officers (COs) working within facilities on a day-to-day basis. As COs work to maintain peaceful order within facilities and between inmates with histories of mental illness, substance abuse and violence, they also routinely put themselves in harm's way. This is why being a CO is considered one of the riskiest professions.

Between 2005 and 2009, the rate of sustained, nonfatal workplace injuries per 1,000 COs was 33, which ranked third only to police officers and security guards.<sup>1</sup> Between 1999 and 2008, 113 U.S. COs lost their lives in the line of duty.<sup>2</sup> COs also deal with high

levels of stress, burnout and a variety of other mental health-related consequences. These factors may have contributed to the estimated 16.2 percent of COs who, between 2000 and 2008, resigned from their posts



after only three years on the job.<sup>3</sup> Turnover figures are often higher for individual corrections departments.

These impacts can have damaging effects on the wider prison institution. Staff shortages and officer absences from work can create a cycle of low officer-to-inmate ratios and threaten the security of the facility. Given these circumstances, it is imperative that the safety and wellness of COs is made a priority within corrections facilities and for future corrections research.

### Risks and dangers faced by COs

A recent National Institute of Justice (NIJ)-supported paper by Frank Ferdik and Hayden Smith reviewed the available research on CO safety and wellness in an effort to uncover the risks COs confront within their line of work, the policies and programs that could improve their safety, and the limitations of the current research on keeping COs safe.<sup>4</sup> This article discusses what the authors found about the risks faced by COs and their impact on institutional stability to help guide corrections policies and practices to improve safety and minimize the risk of burnout and turnover.

The authors found that following several legislative reforms started in the 1970s that included “get tough on crime” policies such as mandatory minimum sentences and habitual offender laws,<sup>5</sup> correctional institutions

experienced dramatic changes in the composition of the inmate population. Not only did the total number of incarcerated offenders skyrocket from roughly 300,000 to more than 1.5 million between 1975 and 2013, but the percentage of offenders imprisoned for violent crimes increased from about 40 percent in 1985 to more than 60 percent by 2013.<sup>6</sup> Although incarceration rates have declined in recent years, the modern-day CO is still required to interact with and supervise individuals in a dangerous environment.<sup>7</sup>

The authors found a variety of dangers and risks correctional officers face in the course of doing their job, which fall across the following five categories:

**Work-related dangers.** This includes inmates with infectious diseases, prison gangs, disruptive inmate behavior, contraband presence, inmates with mental illness and prison riots.

**Institutional-related dangers.** In this category are role ambiguity or role conflict, demanding work obligations, poor leadership, trust or support, no input into decision-making, inadequate resources and employee benefits, extended hours, coworker conflict, and understaffing.

**Psychosocial dangers.** Work or family conflict, and media or political scrutiny fall under this umbrella.

**Mental health risks.** Stress and burnout are two examples.

**Physical health risks.** This refers to injuries and death.<sup>8</sup>

These risks build upon one another to adversely impact the COs, their family, and the overall institution in which they work.

### Consequences of risks

Numerous consequences have been linked to the safety and wellness risks confronting COs:

- Fatigued staff and high turnover rates can limit officers' ability to monitor inmates.
- Coworker conflict can increase stress levels and lead to decreased work performance or being distracted while on the job.
- Frequent turnover can worsen budget constraints and force remaining officers to work with inoperable weapons, radios and other necessary equipment.

COs also disproportionately experience higher rates of physical health problems, such as chronic neck, back and knee injuries; heart disease; diabetes; high cholesterol; and hypertension, compared with crisis counselors and law enforcement personnel.

The mental and physical strain of the profession can lead to even graver consequences. In a study of more than 3,000 corrections professionals,

27 percent of officers reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>9</sup> Worse still, the suicide rate for COs is 39 percent higher than that of the general working-age population.<sup>10</sup>

### Policies to promote health and safety

Correctional researchers, administrative officials and prison systems seem to have not prioritized the health and safety concerns of COs. While some facilities have begun to implement programs and policies to improve CO health and reduce stress, such as employee assistance programs and peer-support programs, these have not been used on a large scale, nor has their effectiveness been evaluated. These programs may also neglect some of the risks described above that affect CO wellness and safety.

The authors identified a few key elements to reducing CO stress and burnout. First and foremost, is the recognition by administrative officials and other correctional stakeholders that the profession →



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of the crime with the words like “I don’t know why I got so much time,” “My lawyer said I would get probation,” or “I don’t deserve this, I had a crappy lawyer.” It all sounds like the first “blame” conversation on record when Adam said the woman made him do it, and Eve said the serpent made her do it. Blaming others is a sure sign of shame and a sure predictor for recidivism. Society encourages blaming with all its “-isms,” like racism, sexism, atheism, legalism, realism, relativism, idealism, etc., influences that are also evident in the correctional environment. Chaplains are called to acknowledge our own bias so we can care for all the men and women who suffer from trauma, brokenness, shame and guilt.

**Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is the fifth and final step and the overall goal of the process. This involves eschatological hope, the end times or last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. As chaplains, we must hold this hope for our flocks until they can hold it for themselves. This is difficult everywhere, but maybe more so in prison and jail settings. How many times do we hear, “I believe God forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself”? That is shame talking, the belief that something is inherently wrong inside of me.<sup>10</sup> Shame has a way of talking back to hope with accusations like “You’re never good enough; you aren’t worthy of love.” Hope dies in the darkness of shame, the “dark night of the soul.” However, the chaplain’s

calling is to point to the light of hope in the face of overwhelming darkness.

**Hope**

At times, we all need someone to continue pointing to the light of hope until we are able to see it for ourselves. In the darkness of prison or jail, many incarcerated individuals long for just a little grace. As correctional employees, we are required to be firm, fair and consistent. However, as chaplains, we are called to do more; we can be that someone holding the light of hope for others who thought they lost all of it.

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is dangerous and comes with threats to CO health. This also involves changing the “machismo” culture inside corrections that perceives needing assistance or being honest about the negative impacts of the job as a sign of weakness to one that recognizes the importance of external support to ensure and improve individual well-being.

Other policies to reduce work- and institutional-related risks, include:

- Heightened intake procedures to identify problematic inmates.
- Improved communication channels between correctional line staff.
- Separation of gang members.
- Ensuring officers always have

backup when dealing with troublesome offenders.

- Instruction and training on mediation tactics to de-escalate volatile situations.
- Provision of additional therapeutic services, where possible, for offenders with mental disorders.<sup>11</sup>

While the past several decades have produced important insights into the working conditions of corrections officers and their general well-being, there needs to be more knowledge about the specific factors that contribute to fatal and nonfatal workplace injuries, poor health, mental health issues, and officer suicide. Further research on these

factors can help correctional administrators prevent workplace injury and related health issues, as well as intervene to protect COs from risky and dangerous situations.

To support corrections administrators in this effort, NIJ has committed to invest in safety, health, and wellness research — as described in a strategic research plan (Search NIJ.gov for “Strategic Plans”). Only with a greater understanding of these problems can corrections develop and evaluate the programs and policies to improve CO safety and wellness, reduce the rate of officer stress and burnout, and further the ability of COs to maintain order within correctional facilities. ♦

*Endnotes on p. 101*

## BEING THE LIGHT OF HOPE

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## SIDEBAR OTHER RELIGIOUS QUOTES ON GUILT AND SHAME

### PAGE 11

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<sup>2</sup> The Quranic Arabic Corpus. (2017). *Verse (10:57) - English translation*. Retrieved from corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=10&verse=57

<sup>3</sup> Buddha Dharma Education Association & BuddhaNet. (2008). *The Dhammapada: Chapter 13, the world*. Retrieved from buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/dp13.htm

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<sup>3</sup> Management and Training Corporation. (2010). *Correctional officers: strategies to improve retention, second edition*. Centerville, UT: Management and Training Corporation.

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<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie, D. L. (2001). *Sentencing and corrections in the 21st century: Setting the stage for the future* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland). Proquest.

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## EASILY BROKEN, HARD TO FIX

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## ADJUSTING TO MEET THE MISSION

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