Officer safety

Part 2 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.

Maintaining security within correctional facilities is an ever-present goal for correctional officers (COs) and administrators. In an effort to improve safety for employees and inmates, correctional administrators may find it useful to examine how COs, who serve as the front line for order and security, perceive risk within prisons and jails.

A recent National Institute of Justice (NIJ)-supported paper[1] by Frank Ferdik and Hayden Smith reviewed the available research on the wellness and safety of COs, including how COs perceive the risks inherent in their profession and how the experiences of law enforcement officers could inform programs and policies to improve CO safety.

Perceptions of health and safety

Since COs play such a crucial role in establishing and maintaining order in their institutions, it is vital to understand how they perceive safety. Several surveys and studies over the last two decades have examined COs' perceptions of danger, the risks of contracting an infectious disease,

risks of injury, and victimization.

While the results of these surveys may vary depending on the type of facility — minimum-security COs often perceive less risk in their work than maximum-security COs — the overall perceptions of risk and danger can improve understanding of COs' concerns. Some of these results include

– Officers perceiving a moderate to high risk of contracting an infectious disease while at work.[2,3]
– A majority of COs judging their entire work environment

to be dangerous. Many officers reported feeling physically threatened by both inmates and co-workers.[4]
– Between 57 and 73 percent of COs employed at medium- and maximum-security facilities expressing moderate to high risk of victimization by inmates.[5]

These perceptions of risk also varied by gender, race and education. Women perceived additional risk, as did non-white COs and those with more formal education. One study of maximum-security facilities found

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that a majority of COs surveyed perceived a high risk of injury, but those who worked in corrections longer perceived an even higher level of risk.[6]

When COs perceive high levels of any type of risk in their work environments, this can adversely influence their job performance and can contribute to high levels of turnover. Moreover, elevated stress and job dissatisfaction levels may cause hostile interactions between officers and inmates that can negatively affect offender management. Therefore, it is important to gather insight into perceived workplace risk in order to improve policies and programs to enhance CO well-being.

Identifying policies to support officer safety

Based on their review of the available research on policies and programs to improve CO wellness and safety, the authors found that very few programs have been evaluated. As a result, they recommended that administrators look to how the law enforcement community has addressed these issues.

Before looking at what law enforcement programs and policies

may support CO wellness and safety, it is important to remember that police officers and COs work in dramatically different conditions. Law enforcement officers face dangerous individuals periodically during their shift and also have the opportunity to engage with prosocial members of the community. COs, on the other hand, are exposed to violent and dangerous offenders throughout the entirety of their work shifts, with limited interactions within the community. COs are also not permitted to carry lethal or less-lethal devices for protection, which may affect their perceptions of risk and safety.

Despite these differences, COs and law enforcement officers face

similar health and safety problems as a consequence of their physically demanding and dangerous shift work. Corrections administrators may be able to look toward their law enforcement counterparts in order to identify first steps to improve CO safety.

For example, corrections departments have begun using employee assistance programs (EAPs). These programs provide consultations to organizational leaders to help manage troubled employees and provide confidential and timely services to employees, including referral to treatment providers. Law enforcement agencies across the country have used EAPs,[7] but a 2013 American Correctional Association report noted that fewer than 100 corrections departments have used them[8] and their effectiveness has not been evaluated.

Another strategy that could be useful within corrections is peer-support programs. These programs recruit workforce colleagues to provide emotional and social support to those who may have had traumatic experiences while on the job. This peer counseling could help troubled

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officers cope with the risks and dangers inherent in their profession, as well as improve trust and social support between officers. Unfortunately, like EAPS, peer-support programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness within a corrections context.[9]

Other programs focused on improved CO health have been studied, such as the HeartMath's Power to Change Performance Program, which was found to reduce stress, cholesterol, heart rate, and blood pressure levels.[10] Another study found significant reductions in CO stress and heart rate levels when a prison installed a mural depicting a nature scene. [11]

Some institutions have used critical incident stress-reduction units, which provide debriefings and counseling, to address the mental health needs of officers who have experienced trauma while on the job, such as hostage takeovers, riots, or the murder of a co-worker or inmate.[12] Such counseling is often not available to COs due to limited resources.

These strategies may help corrections administrators provide a safer work environment for COs, which can lead to more orderly institutions. Even so, more research is necessary to identify ways to reduce the risks inherent to the profession and improve CO perceptions of safety. NIJ plans to advance safety, health, and wellness research through a Strategic Research Plan (Search NIJ. gov for "Strategic Plans"). Viewers can read the full Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis at ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ nij/250484.pdf. ◆

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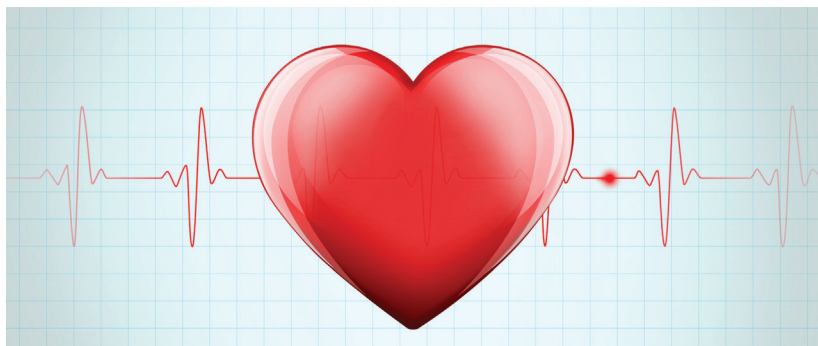
The authors identified other strategies to improve CO safety and wellness that may fit within tight budgets:

Encouraging COs to seek social support from others and selectively ignore stress-inducing stimuli.

Promoting greater teamwork among line staff, offering positive reinforcement to productive staff, and reducing role ambiguity.

Rotating officer shifts to make them less physically taxing.

Screening incoming officer applicants for susceptibility to stress and better preparing officers to confront workplace dangers.

Source: Keinan, G. & A. Malach-Pines. (2007). Stress and burnout among prison personnel: Sources, outcomes, and intervention strategies. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(3), 380-398.

Heart: iStock.com/MarinaZg; umbrella graphic iStock.com/Planet Flem

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