

Correctional Officer Stress: A Cause for Concern and Additional Help*

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Introduction

STRESS¹ AMONG correctional officers² is an important concern. While the pervasiveness and severity of correctional officer stress are open to question, many officers clearly experience considerable work-related stress. Furthermore, some of the sources of stress for correctional officers appear to be getting worse. In addition to the personal suffering it causes, correctional officer stress can compromise safety at prisons and jails, create turnover that may force departments to hire less qualified applicants than they would like, and require extra taxpayers dollars to pay overtime to officers covering for sick and disabled coworkers.

The number of officers exposed to or experiencing stress is potentially large. In 1996, there were 281,332 correctional officers working custodial and security functions in the nation—209,468 working in state prisons, 59,774 in jail and detention facilities, and 12,090 in federal institutions (ACA, 1997).

This article begins by examining the evidence regarding the pervasiveness and severity of correctional officer stress. It then summarizes research about what causes this stress and what effects stress has on officers and correctional institutions. A review of selected efforts to help prevent and treat correctional officer stress follows.

The article is based on a review of the pertinent literature identified primarily through database searches conducted by the National Clearinghouse for Criminal Justice Information and the National Institute of Corrections. The article also is based on telephone interviews with nine line correctional officers, four mid-level administrators (lieutenants and captains) and two superintendents, nine providers of stress prevention and reduction services, and nine other knowledgeable individuals. Officers and administrators included individuals from public and private prisons and from federal, state, and local prisons and jails. The appendix lists the individuals interviewed for the article.³

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Correctional Officer Stress: How Bad Is It?

Most research on correctional officer stress has sought to identify the *sources* of stress among officers, not *how much* stress officers experience. Among the studies that have examined stress levels, no consistent evidence establishes the proportion of correctional officers who suffer stress or how severely they experience it (Huckabee, 1992). Nevertheless, the available empirical evidence suggests that stress is widespread and in many cases severe. For example, a 1984 study found that 39 percent of 241 line officers who returned a mailed questionnaire reported that their job was “very” or “more than moderately” stressful. A 1985 study found that 62 percent of 120 prison staff in daily contact with inmates reported that working with the institution bureaucracy was very or extremely stressful; at least 30 percent reported that dealing with coworkers, responding to supervisors, and the danger of the job were very or extremely stressful. Furthermore, as reviewed below, the widespread use of excessive sick time and the high turnover among correctional officers suggests that many of them are experiencing considerable stress. Anecdotal evidence from the literature (e.g., Kauffman, 1988) and the individuals interviewed for this article largely confirm this conclusion.

Several circumstances may have created increased stress for correctional officers in recent years:

- Inmate crowding has increased in state correctional facilities (BJS, 1997; Stephan, 1997).
- There has been an increase in the number of inmate assaults against staff. The number of attacks in state and federal prisons jumped by nearly one-third between 1990 and 1995 from 10,731 to 14,165 (Stephan, 1997).
- Because offenders are serving longer sentences, more prisoners do not fear any punishment or the authority of the correctional officers (Martinez, 1997). According to a superintendent, “Inmates today aren’t afraid to assault staff; they don’t care if they get put in segregation.”
- There are more gangs—and more dangerous gangs—in prison (Martinez, 1997).

What Causes Stress for Correctional Officers?

A fundamental feature of working in prisons and jails that causes stress is that people do not like being held against their will and being closely supervised (Cornelius, 1994). According to a researcher, "Any organization or social structure which consists of one group of people kept inside who do not want to be there and the other group who are there to make sure they stay in will be an organization under stress" (Brodsky, 1982).

Studies (e.g., O'Brien & Gustafson, 1985; Harris, 1980) and several interviewees also reported that, as officers observe so many released inmates returning again and again, the officers come to feel they are wasting their time because the penal system does not result in rehabilitation. "There is no positive feedback for correctional officers," a stress prevention trainer observed.

Beyond these two general sources of stress, the interviews conducted for this article and the literature reviewed (see figure 1) confirmed the observation that "researchers have yet to sufficiently identify the factors that contribute to the stress correctional officers experience" (Grossi, 1990). To provide a framework for discussing the disparate stresses, the discussion below distinguishes among stresses caused by the organization, those created by correctional work itself, and those brought on by factors external to the institution.

Organizational Sources of Stress

Much of the literature (e.g., Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1986; Cheek & Miller, 1981) and many individuals interviewed for this article suggest that the "organization" is a major source of stress for many officers. The four work conditions officers identified most consistently as causing stress are understaffing, overtime, shift work, and supervisor demands.

Understaffing. Understaffing in a correctional context is a chronic condition in which there are not enough officers available to staff authorized posts.⁴ Most interviewees reported that chronic and sometimes severe understaffing are prevalent in many prisons and jails as a result of unattractive salaries, high turnover, and excessive use of sick time and disability leave (see also, Thompson, 1994; Rosefield, 1983; Delmore, 1982; Brodsky, 1982; Harris, 1980; NIC, n.d.-b).⁵ Understaffing can create different kinds of stress: lack of time to complete required tasks at all or in a conscientious manner, such as head counts, searches, and paperwork; working at breakneck speed every day to complete the required work; concern that there are too few officers on line or available as back-up should inmate violence occur; and inability to get time off for special occasions or family crises.

Overtime. Staff shortages create the need for extensive and stress-producing overtime among remaining staff. As a result, some officers resort to subterfuge to

avoid the extra work. According to an intake administrator for a state department of corrections, "At least 100 officers have told me they don't answer their telephones because it might be the institution calling for overtime." Some officers get a second and unlisted telephone number that they keep secret from the department. In many cases, overtime is unavoidable, as when officers are told at the end of their shift that they have to remain to work the following shift to cover vacant posts (Kauffman, 1988). In one facility, officers are allowed to refuse overtime assignment only once a year; the second refusal results in a warning, the third results in a 1-day suspension, and the fourth may result in termination.

Several interviewees reported that they or some of their coworkers welcome overtime because of the extra money they can earn. However, supervisors and providers made clear that, even when officers volunteer to work overtime, the long hours result in sloppy work and, in some cases, burnout. One officer herself admitted, "Overtime is great—I worked three OTs a week for 18 months. But I got burned out, and my supervisors didn't even acknowledge my contribution." As a stress counselor observed, "Doing a double means spending 16 hours in a row with people who are not nice." Of course, if overtime causes burnout, both sick leave and turnover increase, resulting in still greater demands for overtime.

Shift work. Interviewees consistently reported that rotating shifts, still commonplace in many prisons and jails, create havoc with officers' family lives and reduce their ability to perform their responsibilities conscientiously because of fatigue and irritability (Cornelius, 1994; Kauffman, 1988). "You can tell when shift work is getting to officers," a lieutenant said. "Their work gets sloppy, their searches become careless, their units are filthy, and they stop following the rules." An officer doing rotating shifts reported, "One day I pulled over to the side of the road because I couldn't remember whether I was going to work or going home."

Supervisor demands. Several interviewees reported that supervisors are a source of stress because, as one officer said,

They are always on you to do the job right, but you can't do it right [because of staff shortages]. There is supposed to be one officer per tier here, but now they've collapsed the posts and there is one officer for every two tiers. So there just isn't enough time for me to get inmates awakened, showered, and fed, keep my log books up to date, do my checks, and make sure the catwalks have all been cleaned and disinfected.

Of course, as another officer observed about a deputy warden who nitpicked him, "But that's his job."

The literature consistently has highlighted two other sources of organizational stress that interviewees did not identify as stressful: role conflict and role ambiguity.

Role conflict. Many surveys and literature reviews identify "role conflict" as a serious source of stress

FIGURE 1. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF 10 STUDIES OF CORRECTIONAL OFFICER STRESS

Author(s)	Survey Date	Location	Population	Sample Size—Response Rate	Method	Number and Type of Facilities	Most Significant Sources of Stress
National Institute of Corrections	1990	Indiana	All correctional	317—79%	Self-administered questionnaire	1 prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal job rewards (low pay, poor promotional opportunities, lack of supervisor appreciation) Potential to be harmed Conflict with coworkers Unpleasant physical work conditions (e.g., ventilation)
Cross	1987	Michigan	Line officers work camp supervisors	994—94%	In-person interview	30 facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts with inmates Poor quality of administration Role conflict Lack of influence in decisions Lack of promotional opportunities Danger Relations with coworkers
Grossi	1987	Kentucky	Line officers	106—NA	Self-administered questionnaire	3 prisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role conflict Dangerousness
Breen	1985	Canada	All employees in daily contact with inmates	120—45%	Mailed questionnaire	1 prison	<p>Very or extremely stressful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bureaucracy (62%) Problems with coworkers (37%) Problems with supervisors (33%) Dangerousness (30%) Restrictions on personal and social life (25%)
O'Brien & Gustafson	1985	Iowa	Line officers supervisors administrators	891—47%	Self-administered questionnaire	8 prisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dealing with inmates Overly strict supervision by managers Lack of positive feedback from managers Inflexibility of scheduling
Lindquist & Whitehead	1984	Alabama	Line officers	241—71%	Mailed questionnaire	All prisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dealing with violent or mentally disturbed inmates (63%) Inconsistent instructions from supervisors (60%) 39% said job was very, or more than moderately, stressful
Cullen et al.	1985	South	Correctional officers	155—62%	Mailed questionnaire	State prison system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role conflict Dangerousness
Delmore	1981	District of Columbia	All department employees	756—44%	Self-administered questionnaire	Prison	<p>High levels of dissatisfaction regarding nine work-related conditions including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff shortages Job insecurity Lack of promotional opportunities and training Poor pay and benefits Dangerousness
Cheek & Miller	1981	Pennsylvania, Illinois, Washington State	Line officers	818—37%	In-person interview	Prisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate pay Lack of administration support Overcrowding Changes in management priorities Inmate manipulation
Cheek & Miller	1978-79	New Jersey	Line officers	143—NA	Self-administered questionnaire	Prisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problems with inmates Problems with supervisors Conflict with coworkers Shift work Lack of training Conflicting orders

among correctional officers (e.g., Grossi, Keil, & Vito, 1996; Woodruff, 1993; Philliber, 1987; Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986; Crouch, 1986; Ratner, 1985; Dahl, 1979; Dahl & Steinberg, 1979). According to one researcher, "Role conflict appears in the literature to be the predominant sources of both stress and job dissatisfaction among correctional officers" (Grossi, 1990). Researchers define role conflict as the struggle officers engage in to reconcile custodial responsibilities (maintaining security such as preventing escapes and preventing inmate fights) with their treatment functions (helping inmates to rehabilitate themselves).

However, none of the correctional officers and supervisors interviewed for this article identified role conflict as a source of stress. Furthermore, there is evidence that some officers in facilities that have introduced education and treatment programs that involve the active participation of officers find the addition of a rehabilitation mission to their custodial function reinvigorating (Finn, 1997; Parent, 1990).

Role ambiguity. A second repeatedly mentioned source of organizational stress in the literature that interviewees did not single out is role ambiguity (Woodruff, 1993; Gerstein, Topp, & Correll, 1987; Crouch, 1986; Cullen et al., 1985; Rosefield, 1981, 1983; Brodsky, 1982; Harris, 1980; Dahl, 1979; Dahl & Steinberg, 1979; NIC, n.d.-a). Role ambiguity is the uncertainty created by supervisors who expect officers to "go by the book" and follow all rules to the letter when supervisors and line officers alike know that officers must be flexible and use judgment in their interactions with inmates. According to one survey,

While officers work in a paramilitary organization marked by explicit lines of authority and a host of formal regulations, their task of managing inmates demands flexibility, the judicious application of discretionary justice, and the ability to secure inmate compliance through informal exchanges which deviate from written rules. Ambiguous and conflicting expectations are a likely result and a potential source of stress. (Cullen et al., 1985)

It is unclear why the literature consistently identifies role conflict and role ambiguity as significant sources of stress while the interviewees failed to mention them. However, it is important to note that excessive failure to follow institutional procedures puts daily facility administration on an ad hoc, unpredictable basis, resulting in reduced inmate control. There is clearly a need to find a workable middle ground between officer rigidity and complete discretion in following procedures.

Work-Related Sources of Stress

There is a consensus in the literature and among the interviewees regarding four aspects of correctional work that are stressful: the threat of inmate violence, actual inmate violence, inmate demands and attempts at manipulation, and problems with coworkers.

Threat of inmate violence. Several published surveys of officers have identified the ever-present potential for inmate violence against officers as a significant source of stress. For example, Cullen et al. (1985) found the threat to be the second highest source of stress (see also, Kauffman, 1988; Crouch, 1986; Breen, 1986; Rosefield, 1983; Delmore, 1982; Lombardo, 1981; Dahl, 1979). More interviewees identified the threat of inmate violence as a source of stress than any other single feature of their occupation.

Inmate violence. Actual violence—including assaults, hostage taking, riots, inmates killing each other, and inmate suicides—can be a major source of stress for many officers not only during the episodes but afterwards (Freeman, 1997; Washington State Department of Corrections, 1992). According to one researcher, "Staff anxiety is intensified [after critical incidents] by the aftermath of recriminations, scapegoating, blaming, and job insecurity" (Freeman, 1997). Not all officers find these events stressful, at least once they are over. A survey of 182 officers in an institution in which 13 officers were taken hostage found that three-quarters of the staff claimed they experienced no problems in the aftermath (Montgomery, 1987).

Inmate demands and manipulation. Many officers find the constant demands and attempts at manipulation by some inmates to be stressful (Cornelius, 1994; Woodruff, 1993; Marston, 1993). According to one correctional officer, "When officers are manipulated [successfully] by inmates . . . they may experience extreme stress" (Cornelius, 1992). A few interviewees reported that managing inmates is made still more stressful when there are cultural differences between inmates and officers or when staff members have not been trained in cultural differences and how to deal with them.

Problems with coworkers. Many officers experience stress working with other officers. One survey found that 22 percent of staff viewed "other staff" as creating more stress than any other single factor except for dealing with hostile, demanding inmates (Marston, 1993). Several interviewees expressed the same opinion. The following conditions can precipitate stress among coworkers:

- Burned out coworkers venting their frustrations to their colleagues (Cornelius, 1994);
- Officers competing for limited, choice assignments (Brodsky, 1982; Dahl, 1979);
- Apprehension that coworkers will refuse to back them up or protect them in a confrontation with inmates (Brodsky, 1982; Dahl, 1979), are too inexperienced (e.g., due to high turnover) to know how to help out (Brodsky, 1982; NIC, n.d.-a), or do not have the physical or emotional strength to be effective; and

- Inappropriate officer behavior toward inmates—bringing in contraband, getting too friendly, using unnecessary force, taking questionable disciplinary action, and failing to do their work conscientiously (ACA, 1996; Crouch, 1986; Brodsky, 1982; NIC, n.d.-a).

Stress From Outside the System

There appear to be two significant sources of stress for officers that originate outside the prison or jail: poor public image and low pay.

Low public recognition/image. According to one researcher, “Many [officers] feel they are perceived, and come to perceive themselves, as occupying the lowest rung of the law enforcement pecking order” (Brodsky, 1982; see also, Kantrowitz, 1996; Hill, 1994; Smith, 1994; Philliber, 1987; Stalgaitis, Meyers, & Krisak, 1982). Another researcher reported that “a negative image of corrections is regularly portrayed in the media . . . [with officers depicted] as stupid, animalistic, and senseless abusers of socially wronged individuals” (Van Fleet, 1992). As one officer said, “The public hasn’t a clue as to what correctional officers do. Someone asked me just the other day if I beat inmates all the time.”

As a result, “over the years, many husbands and wives of correctional officers have complained to me that they lie when asked what their spouses do for a living—not because they are ashamed of their spouses’ work but because their spouses are ashamed of working in corrections” (Van Fleet, 1992). The end result is that some officers come to feel isolated and estranged from friends and family (Maghan & McLeish-Blackwell, 1991; Kauffman, 1988; Harris, 1980). A female officer said she routinely tells other people “I work for the State,” refusing to specify her precise job.

Poor pay. Studies have reported that many officers cite low pay as a source of stress (Stohr et al., 1994; Stalgaitis, Meyers, & Krisak, 1982; Delmore, 1982; Brodsky, 1982; Cheek & Miller, 1981; Rosefield, 1981; NIC, n.d.-a). Several interviewees confirmed this finding. Starting pay in one private institution was \$14,000 to \$16,000 a year. In one state, officers start out earning \$18,000; the most they can earn after 18 months is \$26,400. The beginning salary in another state is \$12,000. (By contrast, the starting salary in Massachusetts was nearly \$31,000 in 1997.)

What Are the Effects of Stress?

Stress creates several problems for officers and for institutions:

Impaired health. In addition to causing unhappiness and suffering among those experiencing excessive stress, stress may result in physical illnesses ranging from heart disease to eating disorders. It also can pre-

cipitate substance abuse among susceptible individuals (Woodruff, 1993; Cheek & Miller, 1983).

Excessive sick time. For many years, reports in the literature have suggested that correctional officers take excessive sick leave as a means of coping with stress on the job (e.g., Cornelius, 1994; Ratner, 1985; O’Brien & Gustafson, 1985; Brodsky, 1982; Cheek, 1982; Dahl & Steinberg, 1979). Studies in New York State and California found that correctional personnel used more sick leave than did other state workers (Cheek, cited in Cornelius, 1994). Most interviewees reported that officer stress still results in extensive overuse of sick time and disability leave—at a time when unscheduled absenteeism in industry as a whole is at its lowest rate this decade (Maxwell, Perera, & Ballagh, 1997). One lieutenant guessed that 20 percent of officers who call in sick are just burned out. A captain estimated that 90 percent of officers abuse their sick time in this manner.

Excessive sick time increases the overtime required of other officers—and therefore exacerbates *their* stress and impairs *their* work performance. Thus, taking “mental health days” is a response to stress but also a cause of further stress. It is also expensive. California spent a reported \$1.86 million in overtime pay in 1975–76 alone to cover posts for officers on sick leave (Cheek & Miller, 1981).

Burnout. Numerous reports, confirmed by several interviewees, have indicated that stress can lead to burnout among officers (Cornelius, 1994; Woodruff, 1993; O’Brien & Gustafson, 1985; Cheek & Miller, 1981; Dahl & Steinberg, 1979).

High staff turnover. Many studies (e.g., Slate, 1992; O’Brien & Gustafson, 1985; Brodsky, 1982) and interviewees reported that staff turnover is very high in many facilities. The average turnover in prisons nationwide in 1986 was nearly 12 percent (ACA, 1997), but in some states, such as Arizona, South Carolina, and South Dakota, the rate was over 25 percent. The high turnover is likely to be at least in part a result of stressful work conditions including low pay and burnout. Some rookies quit when they discover that the job is not what they expected.

The high rate of turnover is one explanation for understaffing—departing staff cannot be replaced quickly enough. However, turnover among experienced staff also forces remaining staff to work with a large number of rookies who are not as trustworthy or experienced coming to their aid in a crisis. “One day last month, my entire second shift were rookies,” an anxious 3-year veteran officer reported. This problem is compounded when assignments are passed out on the basis of seniority, resulting in the least experienced officers staffing the least desirable—and typically the most dangerous and demanding—posts. Because these inexperienced officers are the ones who are least equipped to do their jobs, performance may be impaired, leading

to increased risk of conflict with inmates and other officers including supervisors. Finally, if constant turnover results in inmate exposure to officers who have not yet learned the institution's procedural rules and how to enforce them consistently, inmates may either increase their attempts to manipulate staff in an effort to test or exploit the officers' inexperience or be genuinely confused about what behavior is and is not allowed. Either result could increase officer stress.

Reduced safety. Several interviewees reported that stress often results in impaired work performance such as sloppy searches and careless counts. By making officers less patient, stress may reduce their ability to resolve confrontations peaceably, resulting in increased use of force to get inmates to obey.

Prematurely early retirement. Stress has been implicated in excessive disability retirements (Slate, 1992). Even when physical ailments are the reason for the disability, the illnesses may have been brought on by stress. In the 1970s, time off for disability by New York State correctional staff was 300 percent higher than the state average. Sixty percent of the disability leave was for heart, emotional, or drinking problems (Wynne, 1978). Stress-related disabilities among officers exceeded \$40 million in California in 1985 alone (Ratner, 1985).

Impaired family life. The literature (e.g., Breen, 1986; Black, 1982) and interviewees agree that correctional officers experiencing excessive stress damage their family relationships by displacing their frustration onto spouses and children, ordering family members around just as they issue commands to inmates, and becoming distant by withholding information about their work that they feel family members will not understand. Shift work and overtime can create stress by making it difficult for officers to attend important family functions.

Resources to Help Officers Are Limited

It appears that there are not many recognized resources correctional officers can access for help in coping with stress. In addition, many officers who do have access to assistance fail to take advantage of it. This review identified several programs designed to help prevent and treat stress among correctional officers. The types of available stress services fall into four categories:

- academy training;
- in-service training;
- critical incident stress management; and
- individual counseling.

Academy Training

Many correctional officer academies provide up to several hours of class time devoted to warning recruits

about potential sources of stress, symptoms of stress, and coping mechanisms. However, most academy training appears to be generic rather than focused specifically on correctional work. Discussions focus on the nature of burnout rather than on features of the correctional environment that can cause stress. Coping mechanisms include meditation and exercise but exclude on-the-job strategies that might reduce the stresses of being a correctional officer. Perhaps for these reasons, one officer reported that what he learned about stress at the academy "went in one ear and out the other." Another said, "The problem with academy training is you forget it when you're on the job," adding that "the older staff tell you to forget everything you learned there anyway."

The National Institute of Corrections' National Academy of Corrections has stopped using its module on stress in its training curriculum for correctional managers (NIC, n.d.-b). The academy does not offer classes on stress for recruits.

In-Service Training

As far back as 1982, a researcher could write that "administrative departments in the United States are adding stress training segments to their curricula for new recruits to correctional services, in the hope that this will aid officers in doing their jobs effectively" (Inwald, 1982). A researcher recently reported that "it appears common practice for many correctional and detention managers to offer stress management training as a part of initial orientation and training or through scheduled in-service training sessions" (Marston, 1993). A recent *Corrections Compendium* survey of state departments of corrections confirms this observation (Hill, 1997). Among the 41 responding states, 13 reported devoting 1 to 2 hours of annual in-service training to stress programming, 12 reported 3 to 5 hours, and 4 reported 6 to 8 hours. Only 11 states reported devoting no time to stress programming.

Examination of several curricula used in these classes suggests that, as with academy classes, the presentations are generic in nature. Two psychologists with the New York City Department of Correction, while noting that "behavioral interventions such as stress management . . . have become common components of correctional training curricula," added that the courses

may not be appropriately utilized, particularly if the skills have not been fully mastered. Moreover, these interventions may be too generic to effectively address the concomitants of a given individual's exposure to prison violence. The very existence of such training may lull administrators and officers into a false sense of security with regard to its effectiveness in ameliorating the negative emotional effects of occupational violence. (Safran & Tartaglino, 1995).

William Wilkie, the acting director of the National Academy of Corrections, confirmed this perception:

There is more talk about it [officer stress] as a concern than actual insertion into [academy or in-service] training curriculums. Whatever was put in has become routinized and doesn't address officers' stress situations or stress. It's perfunctory: here's [sic] the symptoms and here's how to alleviate them. We need stuff that is more specific to *corrections*. So a lot of departments say they are doing it [providing stress training], but it's so generic it's useless.

Individual Counseling

A few large prisons and sheriff's departments have in-house units (distinct from Employee Assistance Programs) devoted exclusively to treating officer stress:

- Since 1987, the Manatee, Florida, Sheriff's Department, with 1,000 employees, has funded an in-house Behavioral Science Unit consisting of a clinical psychologist who counsels patrol and correctional officers and another psychologist who does fitness-for-duty evaluations and pre-employment testing. The clinician carries a caseload of about 14 clients, whom he sees usually for brief, focused counseling but may continue to treat for 30 to 40 sessions. The unit provides an 8-hour block of training on stress management at the police academy attended by sheriff's deputy recruits.
- The Massachusetts Department of Corrections funds a stress program consisting of five full-time, paid, trained peer supporters. In addition to providing individual counseling and making referrals when professional assistance is needed, the unit teaches stress management at the academy and during in-service training sessions. Staff members conduct mandatory critical incident debriefings as well. The unit has served 3,600 clients in the past decade including fire fighters and police officers who, for reasons of confidentiality, are afraid to seek help from their Employee Assistance Programs.

Some departments make use of private counseling organizations to provide stress counseling services. These organizations typically offer the entire spectrum of stress services including not only individual counseling but also academy and in-service training and critical incident debriefing:

- The Counseling Team, a private organization consisting of 13 full-time professional counselors in San Bernardino, California, has been providing stress services to officers, supervisors, civilians, and family members in correctional agencies (and law enforcement agencies) since 1982. The team is contracted by two sheriff's departments to provide individual counseling, critical incident debriefings, and academy and in-service training to officers and civilians. The team also trained the current 40 peer supporters in the area as well as training peers in Washington State (Washington State Department of Corrections). Under a subcontract, the Counseling Team provides

critical incident debriefing services to officers in most of the state's prisons.

- Family Services of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, has been offering stress services to 1,400 correctional officers, civilian employees, and their families in the Rhode Island Department of Corrections since 1985. The program has a contract with the State Department of Corrections to establish a Stress Management Unit to "provide and make available to all employees stress education and stress management training . . . to be responsive to the post traumatic needs of correctional personnel . . . [and] to insure a therapeutic avenue for all Department of Corrections employees who demonstrate stress and stress-related symptoms." According to the contract, the unit provides: a 3-hour program to existing employees and a 4-hour class to new employees; a person with clinical expertise in stress management to be on call 24 hours a day to respond to emergencies; and a cadre of trained peer supporters to assist individuals with minor stress.

The department pays for any employee's initial visit to the unit; employees (or their insurance) bear the cost of subsequent visits. A lieutenant has coordinated the 25 peer supporters for 6 years on a volunteer basis. He also teaches the in-service and pre-service stress management units.

It appears that most prisons and jails throughout the country do not have access to these kinds of specialized, confidential services. According to Gary Dennis, Director of Mental Health for the Kentucky Department of Corrections, his nationwide training activities have led him to conclude that most officers only have Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to turn to for help. According to Gary Cornelius (1994), "EAPs, when properly staffed and used, can help correctional staff effectively deal with their stress." However, most interviewees reported that most officers feel EAPs will not maintain confidentiality and are unfamiliar with the nature of correctional officer stress.

Critical Incident Stress Management

Most prisons and larger jails have in-house specially trained teams to address the stress that many officers experience after a critical incident such as a hostage taking, riot, or murder of an officer. However, as noted above, some departments contract with outside organizations—such as Family Services and the Counseling Team—to provide critical incident debriefings. At least two other organizations exclusively or primarily address post-critical incident stress:

- Upon request, eight specially trained mental health professionals with Post Trauma Resources, an independent organization in Columbia, South Carolina, will provide critical incident debriefings and brief

post-trauma counseling to officers in prisons and jails throughout the country. The company provides these services to all types of workplaces from banks (e.g., after an armed robbery) to industries (e.g., after an industrial accident). Corrections represents only five percent of its business. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) funds Post Trauma Resources to train other professionals in other states to conduct critical incident debriefings supported by peers who do early outreach. The firm has prepared guidelines for NIC on how to go about developing a critical incident debriefing program (NIC, n.d.-b). Post Trauma Resources helps correctional managers prepare appropriate responses to work-related traumas before they occur so that managers can initiate a response immediately after a trauma occurs. The organization provides debriefings and limited individual counseling to survivors and observers of traumatic events.

- The On Site Academy in Gardner, Massachusetts, provides week-long residential treatment for individuals in public safety fields, including correctional officers, after they have experienced a traumatic work-related incident. In the past 5 years, the program has treated officers from federal prisons and several state correctional systems as well as a number of Massachusetts jails. The program is administered primarily by volunteers. It is the only residential facility for corrections officers in the world. The academy also offers a “respite model”—corrections officers may stop by for help after a critical incident without an appointment. The academy secures referrals by word of mouth and through formal arrangements with Massachusetts jails.

The chief obstacles to establishing effective and comprehensive stress programs for correctional officers appear to be failure to recognize the need for stress services, lack of empirical evidence that the services can benefit officers or corrections departments, and lack of funding. Three essential strategies for making sure a program succeeds are marketing, addressing officers’ concerns about confidentiality (e.g., Ratner, 1985), and overcoming officers’ attitude that seeking help shows they are weak people (Van Fleet, 1992; Brodsky, 1982). Officers are particularly concerned that seeking help could jeopardize their chances for promotion or make other officers suspicious that they cannot be counted on for back-up.

Conclusion

This review has confirmed that there is little reliable empirical evidence that identifies the severity and sources of stress for correctional officers, in large measure because existing research has relied almost entirely on self-reports and was conducted when several conditions presumed to be related to stress (e.g., crowd-

ing, increased violence, gangs) were less problematic than they are today. More reliable indicators of stress would make it possible for interventions to target more accurately the precise causes of officer stress. What is needed is a study that examined a range of surrogate, but objective, indicators of stress such as:

- staff turnover rate
- sick leave use
- absenteeism and tardiness
- inmate grievances or complaints
- disciplinary actions against officers
- disability claims
- premature retirements or disability pensions

Data permitting, the study should examine institutional conditions over time to determine whether they are associated with the proxy measures of stress identified above—for example, whether increased crowding is associated over time with increased absenteeism. Other institutional conditions that might be examined for any association with stress include:

- condition of the physical plant
- staff training levels
- inmate-officer ratios
- staffing levels
- numbers of assaults against officers and among inmates
- increases and decreases in programming levels
- increased cell time
- removal of amenities

The Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Key Indicators Strategic Support System—KISSS—has collected time series indicator data on such variables as turnover and sick leave that could be used to study the relationship between stress (through the proxy measures) to the institutional conditions identified above. Studies in state and local or private facilities would require data extraction from existing administrative records.

NOTES

¹Because stress can be defined in a number of different ways, it has become a catchall “buzz word” for all kinds and levels of emotional and mental problems. This article uses the common dictionary definition of stress: a mentally or emotionally disruptive and upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and a stimulus or circumstance causing such a condition.

²The term “correctional officer” as used in this article includes individuals with direct responsibility for inmate custody and security including line officers and mid-level supervisors (lieutenants and captains).

³No civilians were interviewed. However, the stress programs contacted for the study serve civilians as well as officers. Furthermore, some civilians have more direct contact with inmates than some officers. For example, kitchen staff, laundry supervisors, and maintenance workers may supervise inmate trustees several hours a day.

⁴Relative to the number of custody or security employees, the number of inmates rose from 4.2 to 4.6 between 1990 and 1995 (Stephan, 1997).

⁵The ratio of corrections officers (including supervisory personnel) to inmates was 1:4.64 in 1996 (ACA, 1997). However, since this calculation includes officers on all three shifts, the average ratio per shift was nearly 1:14.

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APPENDIX

Respondents

Line Correctional Officers (respondents were guaranteed anonymity)

- Minority Female: Eastern Seaboard women's prison
- Male: private juvenile facility
- Male: Federal Bureau of Prisons facility
- Minority Male: Southern prison
- Male: Midwestern prison
- Male: Southwestern private prison
- Minority Male: Midwestern county jail
- Male: Northeastern prison
- Male: Texas prison

Supervisors

- Male: Lieutenant, California county sheriff's department
- Male: Warden, federal prison
- Male: Warden, Southwestern prison
- Female: Lieutenant, Southern county sheriff's department
- Male: Lieutenant, Northeastern prison
- Minority Female: Captain, Southern prison

Providers

- Bohl, Nancy. Director, The Counseling Team, San Bernardino, California
- Carr, John. Director, Family Services, Pawtucket, Rhode Island
- Duggan, Hayden. Director, On Site Academy, Gardner, Massachusetts
- Super, John. Counselor, Manatee (Florida) County Sheriff's Department
- McCarthy, Kevin. Director, Intake and Counseling Unit, Hunt (Louisiana) Correctional Center
- Johnson, Roger. Director of Programs, Northeastern New York Safety and Health Council, National Safety Council
- Bergmann, Larry. Director, Post Trauma Services, Columbia, South Carolina
- Hollencamp, James. Director, Massachusetts Department of Correction Stress Unit
- Nouri, Gloria. Director, Stress Management, New Jersey Department of Corrections

Additional Individuals Contacted

- Dennis, Gary. Director of Mental Health, Kentucky Department of Corrections
- Huddleston, Taylor. Training Supervisor, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Institutional Division
- Kammerman, Jack. Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Kean University, Union, New Jersey
- Kerle, Ken. Staff, American Jail Association
- Maghan, Jess. Associate Professor, Criminal Justice, University of Illinois at Chicago, and former Associate Commissioner of Training and Research Development for the New York Department of Corrections
- Marette, Mike. Director, American Correctional Unit, American Federation of State, Municipal, and County Employees (AFSCME)
- Swisher, Steven. Trainer, National Academy of Corrections
- Taylor, William. Staff, American Correctional Association
- Wilkie, William. Acting Director, National Academy of Corrections