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Directed Studies Project Final Paper

Why are Correctional Officers Stressed?

Special Thanks/Dedication

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Introduction

It was 2015 and I was a correctional officer at a federal medium security prison in New Hampshire. I was just getting ready to start my shift, when two inmates came to me requesting medical assistance. An inmate was in cardiac arrest in the upper tier showers. After arriving and finding no pulse, With the inmate on his back, I immediately initiated cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). After what seemed like an eternity, but in actuality was a minute, backup arrived to secure the housing unit and help assist with rescue efforts. The medical team escorted the inmate to the medical bay, while continuing lifesaving efforts. After the medical team left the housing unit with the inmate, my supervisor told me that he was sorry that I witnessed the incident, to hang in there and do my best to finish the shift. Unfortunately, word reached me that the inmate didn't survive the incident due to having a previously known heart condition that affected his chances of survival. Even more tragic was knowing that the inmate left behind a family of seven (six children and a wife), and was due to be released within three months. I was given the opportunity to be debriefed by the critical incident stress management team for an hour. Yet, after that incident, I knew that working in a prison wasn't the career that I wanted. The stress from this traumatic incident was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I noticed how much more anxious I was going into the prison, how I lost more sleep than normal, and getting frequent headaches. Not only did I feel hopeless and took little pleasure in doing things in general, but I also didn't feel safe while working at the prison.

On March 8th, 2020, Correctional Officer III Gabriela Contreas died by suicide. Thirty-one years old at the time of her death, Officer Contreas was a whistleblower who exposed the unsafe conditions of a state prison in Arizona as an employee in 2019. The irrefutable video evidence showcased the stress of working in prison where cell door locks did not function

properly, often resulting injuries for inmates and prison staff. Contreas stated that her motivation for leaking the videos was to expose safety issues, advocate for change, and prioritize safety (Biscobing, 2020). Family members attribute Contreas' death to not being able to change the stressful work conditions of the correctional setting. Unfortunately, Gabriela is not alone in the correctional officers that commit suicide due to stress experienced in corrections. In 2011, Scott Jones, a correctional officer at the California Department of Corrections committed suicide at thirty-six years old. The note he left behind revealed the motivation for his death: "The job made me do it" (Thompson, 2018). Suicide among correctional officers is prevalent due to the stress that comes from working the job, which involves different types of prison violence such as inmate assaults on staff members and other inmates. Experiencing these events often results in high levels of stress that contributes to suicidal thoughts and eventually suicide. As a former correctional officer who was diagnosed with major depression disorder after working in a federal prison, I believe that correctional officer suicide is a significant issue that requires immediate action through policy recommendations and legislation. Recently, Massachusetts has formed a commission to investigate the suicides of approximately sixteen correctional officers from 2010-2015. The goals of the commission include reviewing, evaluating, examining, and developing ways to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression while improving suicide prevention for officers and inmates (Eldridge, 2017). The California Correctional Officer Survey, released in 2017, states: "Of those who say they have thought about suicide, 31% report thinking about it often or sometimes in the past year. However, 73% haven't told anyone, meaning that many are suffering in silence" (Lerman, 2018). In addition to this, the survey also noted: "Work-related stress has significant health consequences. Fifty percent of officers say they rarely feel safe at work, and officers who don't feel safe at work are more likely to report headaches, digestive issues, high

blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease than other correctional officers” (Lerman, 2018).

What are the connections between stress and suicide for correctional officers? Their motivations may be linked to different sources of stress such as lack of prison safety, violence on prison staff members and inmates, and staff quitting. Through understanding how correctional officers experience stress, it is important develop strategies and implement necessary programming to decrease or eliminate stressors that push correctional officers to experiencing PTSD, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Correctional officers face a difficult and stressful work environment. According to researchers: “Correctional officers have one of the highest rates of nonfatal, work-related injuries in the United States. In 2011, correctional officers experienced 544 work-related injuries per 10,000 full-time employees. This was more than four times greater than the rate for all workers (117 cases per 10,000 FTEs)” (Konda, Tiesman, Reichard, & Hartley, 2013). Another study to consider is the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted by psychologist, Phillip Zimbardo. The emphasis of the study was to analyze the behaviors of prisoners and prison guards in a simulated prison environment. The study highlighted that, as time went on, both prisoners and the guards’ attitudes increased in negativity. When correctional staff interacted with each other, Zimbardo observed: “The guards too rarely exchanged personal information during their relaxation breaks. They either talked about “problem prisoners”, other prison topics, or did not talk at all” (Zimbardo, 1971). As a result of extensive interviews after the conclusion of the experiment, researchers learned that depression and stress were influential in the guards’ attitudes towards the prisoners when the guards would emotionally abuse the prisoners to assert their authority and maintain control of the prison. Zimbardo’s experiment exposes the reality of violence and stress in prison culture. With multiple research studies examining the stressors that correctional officers

face, I conclude that the resources available within the correctional setting are not enough to help with correctional officer mental health.

Current resources available to correctional officers when dealing with mental illness leave much to be desired. According to the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offers up to six face-to-face confidential counseling sessions for the following services: critical incident response, management consultation and counseling, and financial and legal services. Beyond this, expenses are either covered through health insurance plans or paid for out of pocket. As a result, depending on the health insurance plan, mental health counseling can be expensive. Many insurance companies do not cover all of the mental health expenses due to the perspective of what is deemed "medically necessary" by the insurance companies (Pajer, 2019). Insurance coverage is important to correctional officer stress because of the stress experienced in the correctional setting. If correctional officers do not receive consistent long-term mental health coverage through medical insurance, their mental health will deteriorate.

Another potential issue is availability as therapists may not be accepting new patients, or there may be a waitlist. Unfortunately, correctional officers struggling with severe mental health issues do not have the time to wait. The longer the wait, the more likely correctional officers will become discouraged and change their mind about their decision.

The objective of this project is to correlate available data concerning sub-optimal operational capacity, which creates the conditions for increased violence on both correctional officers and inmates. This violent prison culture creates institutional instability and heightened correctional officer stress. The possible consequences of increased stress levels include correctional officers quitting, post-traumatic stress disorders, substance abuse, and suicide. This

directed studies project examines the research questions to be answered, explains the research methodology that is used, presents the results and data analysis of the data compiled, and provides policy recommendations to help with correctional officer stress. First, the operational capacity of state prisons will be explained in terms of the inmate to correctional officer ratio. Second, inmate assaults on correctional officers will be calculated based on inmate populations and reported assaults from six state prisons. Third, correlations between inmate assaults on inmates and correctional officer stress will be evaluated and how this connects to correctional officers quitting. Lastly, these issues will be addressed through policy recommendations that create new mental health reform for correctional officer stress.

Literature Review

The National Institutes of Health defines stress as: “A feeling of emotion or physical tension” (National Institute of Health , 2020). Stress can be observed through physical and emotional symptoms. Some of the symptoms of high stress may include: forgetfulness, frequent aches and pains, headaches, lack of energy or focus, sexual problems, diarrhea or constipation, stiff jaw or neck, tiredness, trouble sleeping, upset stomach, use of alcohol or drugs to relax, and weight loss or gain (National Institute of Health , 2020). These signs and symptoms can also affect employee performance in the workplace.

In the article, “Workforce Issues in Corrections” by Joe Russo, published by National Institute of Justice, Russo outlines the issue of retaining uniformed staff in corrections. He provides insight on the partnership between the RAND corporation and the University of Denver that conducted field research and later a report that analyzed participant perspectives. Russo states the that research methodology was comprised of: “The RAND-DU team assembled a group of 13 individuals to participate in a two-day workshop. Participants included correctional

agency executives, representatives of correctional associations and academics” (Russo, Woods, Drake, & Jackson, 2018). Despite focusing on recruitment, the strategy for retention has been a lower priority. Without a doubt, it is important to recruit future correctional officers, but according to the data that will be presented, the percentage of correctional officers quitting has increased with time. Upon further reading, it was noted that the duration of the workshop and the number of participants was lower than expected. With an important study that considers workforce issues in correction, the duration of the study and number of participants should have been higher to allow for more diversity of the data collected. With the sample mostly comprised of correctional executives and academics, it is possible that many of these professionals and experts may have had a strong bias that often favors political agendas more than institutional needs. Although correctional institutions have prioritized staff recruitment, retaining staff has become more difficult. The relationship between correctional officers and retention is important because of the financial investment on behalf of the correctional agency that has been made in training the correctional officer, the accumulation of experience that correctional officers gain that can be utilized to help train new correctional officers and the need for institutional stability. When a correctional officer quits, the negative impact on a correctional facility can be significant. For example, a research study that focused on identifying key needs and factors to help retain quality correctional officers conducted by the National Institute of Justice, found that: “Stressors associated with corrections work were cited by the panelists as critical factors in staff turnover. These stressors, found in both institutional and community-based settings, are significant and can be potentially life-threatening. Ultimately, these stressors not only put individual staff at risk but also have a cumulative impact, hampering the sector’s overall ability to perform its mission” (Russo, Woods, Drake, & Jackson, 2018). As a result, the priority that

should come first is how to retain the staff that are already in the prison, as opposed to hiring staff that stay only months before leaving. This is also crucial in combating the discrepancy of inmate to correctional officer ratios.

The *Correctional Officer Retention* report conducted by the Alabama Department of Corrections in 2013 reported: “According to the statistics outlined on the ADOC website, the inmate to Correctional Officer ratio is eleven inmates to one officer. Alabama isn’t alone in this issue. Recently as of 2019 the Mississippi Department of Corrections reported the average inmate to officer ratio in state prisons was thirteen inmates to every one officer (Mississippi Department of Corrections, 2019). In 2020, the South Carolina Department of Corrections reported that the inmate to officer ratio was ten inmates to every one correctional officer (South Carolina Department of Corrections, 2020). Finally, in 2019, The Bureau of Prisons reported that the officer to inmate to officer ratio is nine inmates to one officer (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2019). This can present a serious danger to officer safety if prison violence were through a riot or a gang war. The Correctional Officer Retention report also states how there is not mentoring program for new correctional officers. Mentoring in the correctional environment is crucial to retaining quality correctional officers because of the knowledge and skills that are learned. Although it is the standard for correctional officers to go through a law enforcement academy for several weeks, the experience gained through on the job training from veteran officers is crucial to learning about corrections. At the Federal Law Enforcement Training Academy in Georgia, I received training in using handcuffs, self-defense techniques, firearms, contraband search methods, security pat downs, report writing, and more. However, each prison is unique in how procedures and routines are conducted. If a new correctional officer were to face a complex situation that was not covered in the academy and not know how to effectively handle it (such as

working with inmates in specialized housing units (such as a geriatric unit where inmates are usually sixty-five years old or over), then the consequences could be deadly for both staff members and inmates. This is where experience of senior correctional officers can be invaluable as they will be able to help guide new correctional officers to become the leaders that they need to be. Whittenburg, a former correctional officer and researcher has stated the significance of his experience with his correctional mentor:

Besides pointing out which staff members were trustworthy and which were not, explaining how to read a correctional roster, and introducing me to fellow officers in the correctional services department, he also helped me establish the foundations that led to me becoming an effective correctional officer. His mentoring did not replace formal training. It supplemented the topics taught with “real world” application. He discussed subjects not normally taught in the classroom (Whittenburg, 1998).

As a result, it should be a priority of the Alabama Department of Corrections to create a mentorship program as a strategy to improve correctional officer retention.

As part of the final directed studies project, the research questions from the proposal were changed to better reflect the final project. As such, these are the research questions were selected.

Research Questions

What are major stressors experienced by correctional officers in a prison?

What role does stress play in prisons retention of correctional officers?

What policies can prisons adopt to address stress and retain correctional officers?

Research Methodology

This research will evaluate data provided by Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Justice statistics, as well as data provided by local, state, and federal prisons, to identify how different prison practices and elements of prison culture shape correctional officer experiences. State prisons in multiple states that report prison operational capacity percentage, inmate assaults on staff members, inmate assaults on inmates, and the percentage of officers that quit, to provide evidence for multiple correlations of why correctional officers are quit will be examined. In addition to this, data available on prison operational capacity will be evaluated and used as a proxy, to gauge how inmate assaults on prison staff members and inmate assaults on inmates can correlate to how many correctional officers quit. While this proxy is imperfect because of the lack of a consistent flow of information, it is the best metric available due to resources and information accessible. The calculation will be the number of assaults per 1,000 inmates or staff members. The data may also reflect the amount of stress that correctional officers and prison systems may be experiencing. With factors related to correctional officers' stress identified through the prison operational capacity in relation to recommendations by academic experts and relevant compiled data, this paper will conclude with research policy recommendations for future research that may delve more deeply into the factors that contribute to correctional officer stress and provide recommendations for how policy makers might ameliorate this.

Results

Table 1:

Percentage of Operational Capacity of State Prisons						
Year	<u>Alabama</u>	<u>Arizona</u>	<u>Colorado</u>	<u>Kansas</u>	<u>Nebraska</u>	<u>Tennessee</u>
2016	172.4%	92.28%	95.90%	98.66%	89.14%	94.90%
2017	157.70%	93.87%	96.81%	99.17%	90.57%	94.90%
2018	163.4%	93.70%	96.31%	100.50%	90.26%	94.50%
2019	169.8%	92.35%	Unavailable	101.20%	88.96%	93.70%

(Data was compiled from various reports from the following agencies: Alabama Department of Corrections, Arizona Department of Corrections, Colorado Department of Corrections, Kansas Department of Corrections, Nebraska Department of Corrections, Tennessee Department of Corrections)

Table 1: From 2016 to 2019, six state department corrections operational capacity were analyzed. The data portrayed is the data currently available to academic researchers. Operational capacity refers to the percentage or number of inmates that a prison can hold and operate within regulations that prioritize correctional staff and inmate safety. Experts in academia recommend that a correctional facility's operational capacity does not exceed 85%. If the operational capacity exceeds 85%, then the correctional staff and inmate safety is at higher risk due to the lack of available resources to ensure safety and stability. It should be noted that all of the state prisons examined were operating above the recommended operational capacity in 2016, and continue to do so in 2019. The Alabama Department of Corrections currently has the highest operational capacity at approximately 169%. This is almost double the recommended operational capacity at 85%. Compared to Kansas also having a high operational capacity percentage at approximately 101%, Tennessee's operational capacity is in slow decline, with the operational

capacity being at approximately 93%. However, Nebraska currently has the lowest operational capacity at approximately 88%. The importance of operational capacity directly correlates to correctional officer stress. If the operational capacity isn't prioritized, then inmate assaults on inmates, inmate self-harm, and inmate assaults on staff members may increase and contribute to more correctional officer stress. Another consequence that contributes to correctional officer stress is overtime. From 2017 to 2018, the Arizona Department of Corrections reported spending more than \$40 million dollars on overtime (Doudna, 2019). If correctional officers are mandated to work more overtime than they are able to, this can quickly lead to correctional officers experiencing fatigue, stress, and ultimately burnout. As a result of increased correctional officer stress, this may motivate correctional officers to quit working in the correctional setting.

Table 2:

Inmate assaults on staff members per 1,000 inmates					
Year	<u>Alabama</u>	<u>Arizona</u>	<u>Colorado</u>	<u>Kansas</u>	<u>Tennessee</u>
2009	2.39	8.16	18.76	1.24	37.30
2010	3.04	8.64	18.62	1.12	30.27
2011	2.38	9.50	17.78	1.08	35.04
2012	2.77	9.45	17.60	0	38.49
2013	3.93	8.79	10.39	0	34.32
2014	4.09	10.84	13.97	1.04	23.48
2015	4.32	10.93	11.67	0	17.19
2016	4.52	13.75	13.11	0	9.56
2017	4.85	13.74	18.42	0	24.74
2018	5.12	11.65	24.89	0	19.47
2019	4.69	15.19	Unavailable	0	20.54

(Data was compiled from various reports from the following agencies: Alabama Department of Corrections, Arizona Department of Corrections, Colorado Department of Corrections, Kansas Department of Corrections, Tennessee Department of Corrections)

Table 2: From 2009 to 2018, five state department of corrections were evaluated for the number of inmate assaults on correctional staff members per 1,000 staff members. The data portrayed is the data currently available to academic researchers. For comparison in 2018, the Bureau of Labor reported that the Incidence rate of nonfatal intentional injury by other person in healthcare was approximately two incidents per 10,000 workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). What is concerning is the increase in inmate assaults on prison staff members. For instance, in 2009, the Arizona Department of Corrections reported that there had been approximately eight incidents per 1,000 staff members. In 2018, this number had increased to approximately fifteen incidents per 1,000 staff members. This reflects a percentage increase of approximately 87.5% over ten years (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2020). Colorado Department of Corrections has also reported a high level of incidents. In 2009, it was reported that there were approximately nineteen incidents per 1,000 staff members. In 2018, this increased to approximately twenty-five incidents per 1,000 staff members reflecting a percentage increase of approximately 32% over ten years. The Department of Corrections in Kansas has the lowest number of assaults on staff members per 1,000 staff members. In 2009 reported that there were approximately one incident per 1,000 inmates where staff members were assaulted. Over the course of ten years, this decreased to zero incidents. However, it should also be noted that the Kansas Department of Corrections only reports assaults that result in serious injuries. In light of this, it is likely that more assaults occurred than what was reported. Even more concerning is the number of states that do not participate in reporting the important information of inmate assaults on staff members to help evaluate correctional officer stress. Currently, the Massachusetts Department of Corrections does not disclose this information for researchers to study trends. The significance of

this data is that when inmate assaults occur on correctional officers, it can result in bodily injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and headaches, irritability, anger, and sleeplessness. The inconsistency of the data reported also highlights the need for more standardized reporting. By examining trends that have to do with inmate assaults on staff members, policy influencers such as correctional administrators can seek to change and enforce policy to help improve the culture of the prison.

Table 3:

Inmate assaults on inmates per 1,000 inmates					
Year	<u>Alabama</u>	<u>Arizona</u>	<u>Colorado</u>	<u>Kansas</u>	<u>Tennessee</u>
2009	8.58	20.83	31.15	1.24	22.81
2010	9.88	34.93	28.00	1.12	16.82
2011	10.86	38.65	28.00	1.08	25.06
2012	12.29	41.85	26.35	0	26.09
2013	14.93	43.20	16.62	0	21.60
2014	15.96	47.82	19.84	1.04	18.59
2015	18.82	51.39	37.95	0	19.21
2016	22.16	55.47	36.33	0	9.32
2017	29.23	53.86	42.32	0	16.91
2018	25.84	52.33	49.71	0	21.71
2019	26.94	52.34	Unavailable	0	25.85

(Data was compiled from various reports from the following agencies: Alabama Department of Corrections, Arizona Department of Corrections, Colorado Department of Corrections, Kansas Department of Corrections, Tennessee Department of Corrections)

Table 3: From 2008 to 2019, five state department of corrections were evaluated for the number of inmate assaults on inmates annually. The data portrayed is the data currently available to academic researchers. According to the data, as of 2019, Arizona Department of Corrections has seen increase in the number of inmate assaults on inmates from approximately twenty incidents

per 1,000 inmates in 2009 to approximately fifty-two incidents per 1,000 inmates in 2019. This reflects a percentage increase of approximately 160% over ten years. The Colorado Department of Corrections has also seen a high percentage increase, with twenty-eight incidents per 1,000 inmate assaults on inmates being reported in 2010 to approximately forty-nine inmate assaults on inmates in 2019. This reflects a percentage increase of approximately 75% over ten years.

(Arizona Department of Corrections, 2020). Other states such as South Carolina, North Carolina, Massachusetts and many others do not report this important information or make it accessible to the public. Inmates still live in fear of the violence that occurs in prison. The New York Times in April 2019, interviewed inmates willingly to talk about prison violence at an Alabama state prison. Through written correspondence the inmates stated:

No one feels safe here. Not the inmates, nor the officers. No one feels safe here when supervisors up to the warden level stand behind the fence of the barricaded, secure area and tell inmates who have fled there looking for protection that they need to go get a knife. No one feels safe here when there are hundreds of inmates roaming around and not an officer in sight. No one can or will answer the uncomfortable questions of why all the veteran officers quit or why the new ones don't stay (New York Times, 2019).

The significance of this data is that when inmate assaults occur on inmates, it can result in bodily injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and headaches, irritability, anger, and sleeplessness. By examining trends that have to do with inmate assaults on inmates, policy influencers such as correctional administrators can seek to change and enforce policy to help the culture of the prison.

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Table 4:

Correctional Officer Staff Leaving percentage rate						
Year	<u>Kansas</u>	<u>Nebraska</u>	<u>Tennessee</u>	<u>Texas</u>	<u>Wyoming</u>	<u>Arkansas</u>
2008	25.3%	Unavailable	28.30%	N/A	22.5%	Unavailable
2009	23.1%	Unavailable	27.90%	21.30%	14.5%	Unavailable
2010	20.8%	Unavailable	19.5%	20.30%	18.6%	Unavailable
2011	22.0%	Unavailable	25.6%	22.40%	19.8%	Unavailable
2012	22.3%	17.47%	30.9%	24.60%	17.6%	Unavailable
2013	23.7%	17.88%	32%	24.40%	18.9%	Unavailable
2014	25.3%	21.45%	29.6%	24.70%	16.7%	Unavailable
2015	29.7%	23.99%	40.3%	26.20%	21.1%	Unavailable
2016	33.2%	25.32%	47.5%	23.10%	16.3%	Unavailable
2017	33.0%	27.61%	45%	28.20%	17.6%	35%
2018	40.83%	31.10%	54.1%	29.52%	16.9%	8.9%
2019	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	35.9%

(Data was compiled from various reports from the following agencies: Arkansas Department of Corrections, Kansas Department of Corrections, Nebraska Department of Corrections, Tennessee Department of Corrections, Texas Department of Corrections, Wyoming Department of Corrections).

Table 4: From 2008 to 2018, six state department of corrections were evaluated for the percentage of institutional security staff members quitting annually. The data portrayed is the data that is currently available to academic researchers. According to the data, as of 2018, Tennessee Department of Corrections has the highest percentage of staff members leaving state corrections at 54.1%. As of 2018, Arkansas has the lowest percentage of staff leaving state corrections. However, in 2019, Arkansas has the highest percentage of staff leaving. This is important to note because the percentage of staff leaving state corrections is not consistent and could mean that there are multiple influences as to why correctional officers are quitting. It may be due to personal goals, unmet job expectations, low wages or other reasons. The biggest factor as to why correctional officers leave the job is most likely due to the influence of prison culture where violence against staff members is frequent. For instance, in Tennessee during 2014, state

corrections department reported that approximately 29.6% of the security staff had quit. By the end of 2015, this percentage increased to approximately 40.3% (Tennessee Department of Corrections , 2020). Although the percentage of staff quitting varies by state, it is nonetheless, a serious issue for correctional institution resources that are stretched because of staff overtime that is initiated to cover shifts that are vacant due to staff quitting.

Research Policy Recommendations

- 1) Create and maintain a central database for county, state, and federal correctional facilities that will collect data about correctional officers to study trends. This database should be maintained by the National Corrections Institute and also include information from private prisons that also train and employ correctional staff. The benefit of having a central database will allow for more standardized information that can be utilized to identify significant trends in corrections. In identifying significant trends, policy makers can think about how to approach correctional officer stressed based on consistent data.
- 2) Correctional administration will implement correctional policy that prioritizes enforcing operational capacity recommendations to improve institutional stability and safety. Institutional stability refers to correctional staff prioritizing individual safety in a prison in order to effectively carry out job duties and responsibilities. For instance, when considering inmate to officer ratio, international academic researchers recommend a ratio of five inmates for every one correctional officer for a prison to operate safely. In the United States, there is no definitive consensus among academic researchers for what the inmate to correctional officer ratio should be (Krauth, 1988). As a result, inmate to correctional officer ratios depend on the correctional facility

needs. In 2010, the Association of State Correctional Administrators (ACSA) conducted a survey asking states to report the inmate to correctional officer ratios in state prisons. States like New Mexico had a low inmate to correctional officer of 3:1. Other states were more than double that number such as South Carolina at nine inmates to every one correctional officer. The average inmate to correctional officer ratio of all the states, came out to approximately six inmates per every one correctional officer (Association of State Correctional Administrators, 2010). Unfortunately, the issue has only worsened since 2010. As of 2019, the Mississippi Department of Corrections reported that the average number of inmates to correctional officers across four state prisons was twelve inmates to every one officer (Mississippi Department of Corrections, 2019). The benefit of implementing these policies will help reduce the inmate to officer ratio while promoting institutional safety and stability for state prisons.

- 3) Reframe sentencing laws to decrease overcrowding of inmates convicted of violent offenses in prisons. Compared to corrections in other countries, the United States currently has the highest percentage that is likely to use incarceration when an adult is found guilty by a court (Wagner, 2018). Instead of being “tough on crime,” by advocating incarceration through sentencing, resources should be focused on violence prevention. Communities that utilize a collaboration of police, social, and health services, see a reduction in offender recidivism through using probation, problem-solving courts and community-based programs. A study conducted by the Bureau of Justice on 400,000 convicts that were released in thirty states in 2005 found that: “people convicted of violent offenses are less likely to be re-arrested within 3

years for any offense than those convicted for nonviolent offenses” (Jones, 2020).

Decreasing the number of violent inmates that are committed to prison will improve correctional officer stress levels because there will likely be a reduction of violent incidents in prisons.

- 4) State Department of Corrections executive leadership will change the training academy curriculum to prioritize correctional officer mental health. Currently, the Correctional Officer Training Academy that is administered by the Arizona Department of Corrections is seven weeks long with two-hundred and eighty hours of instruction. The topics covered during the academy include inmate management, officer safety, communication and other subjects relevant to corrections. Only one hour of the two hundred and eighty hours is dedicated to introducing occupational health services and resources available to correctional officers (Arizona Department of Corrections, 2019). The Maine Department of Corrections Training Academy is two hundred hours of instruction, with two hours dedicated to covering correctional officer stress (Maine Department of Corrections , 2018). However, the Florida Department of Corrections Training Academy for correctional officers is composed of four hundred and eighty hours of instruction, with thirty hours dedicated to correctional officer wellness topics (Florida Department of Corrections , 2020). By comparison, the Correctional Officer Academy in Canada is approximately twenty-one weeks of instruction, covering over eight hundred hours of instruction (Correctional Service, 2019). In noting the differences of Training Academy durations, I recommend restructuring the training academy curriculum to highlight the stress aspect of the job to prospective correctional officers through testimonies

from veteran correctional officers, group interviews, and academic expert presentations.

- 5) Unions for correctional officers should advocate for an increase in access to more efficient mental health resources for correctional officers and inmates. Correctional officers struggle immensely with sharing their experiences in prison with others. A former manager in a correctional facility was quoted saying: “For some officers, consumed by guilt and stress, their lives end in suicide. No one wants to hear or talk about the inmate who changed the television channel in a rival gang’s area of the prison and wound up dead the next day, a pencil driven through his ear and into his brain. Officers are left with no choice but to keep their distressing memories and nightmares to themselves, and then turn up to work the following day” (Corrections Officers , 2019). Currently, correctional officers have access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that is limited to six free sessions with a therapist annually. Once these sessions are used, correctional officers can use either health insurance or pay out of pocket for additional therapy sessions. This EAP program offered to correctional officers is not enough. A study focusing on these correctional officer stress programs conducted by the National Institute of Justice showed that, during 1999, Massachusetts correctional officers had access to in-house peer support and referrals to clinicians. Since 1999, stress programs have not been prioritized for correctional officer mental health. The study also noted that New York correctional officers only had access to in house critical incident debriefing (one-time session talking with a debrief team), and an EAP program. More concerning, was that there was no dedicated funding to cover for the services that were provided (Finn, 2000). In

an effective stress program, there should be dedicated financial funds as part of the Department of Corrections budget. Annual program evaluations should be conducted, and the findings included in the annual report released by the Department of Corrections Commissioner. As part of the stress program, there should be mandatory sessions with a qualified therapist after stressful situations involving individual physical harm covered by the Department of Corrections. The program needs to meet continuously and consistently through group therapy, individual sessions, and self-activities such as self-reflection through journaling. The program should also be mandatory for new correctional officers that complete their probation year, so that they can have multiple opportunities to express their emotions with a professional in the appropriate setting. There should also be collaboration with established local support groups to act as a supplemental resource, where correctional officers feeling stress can be referred to. One of these potential assets is an organization called Emotions Anonymous. It is a nonprofit that strives to provide support for those struggling with their emotions. The mission statement states: “Emotions Anonymous International (EAI) is a nonprofit organization that facilitates the ongoing efforts of an international fellowship of men and women who desire to improve their emotional well-being. EA members come together in weekly meetings for the purpose of working toward recovery from any sort of emotional difficulties” (Emotions Anonymous , 2020). These meetings are conducted in-person and remotely through video chat, phone conferences and online forums. The benefit of improving access to mental health resources is to retain quality correctional officers that have emotional stability that allows them to thrive in the correctional setting.

Conclusion

The introduction, literature review, data tables, personal experience, and research policy recommendations presented reflect numerous causes of stress for correctional officers working in the correctional setting. The data reflected also highlight the lack of data that is available to researchers and members of the public that could be important to identifying important trends and areas of improvement. The ultimate goal in presenting this information is to support research policy recommendations that will help reduce and eliminate correctional officer stress that leads to correctional officer suicide and other harmful behaviors.

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