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Correction Officers: The Forgotten Police Force  
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#### A Correction Officer's Prayer

Lord I ask for courage, courage to face and conquer my own fears...Courage to take me where others will not go...  
I ask for strength, strength of body to protect others and strength of spirit to lead others...  
I ask for dedication, dedication to my job, to do it well, dedication to my community, to keep it safe...  
Give me Lord, concern for others who trust me and compassion for those who need me...  
And please Lord through it all be at my side.  
Author Unknown ([www.rovers.net/~tmartin/CorrectionsPrayer.htm](http://www.rovers.net/~tmartin/CorrectionsPrayer.htm))

Correction Officers (COs) supervise imprisoned individuals awaiting trial or convicted of a crime, maintain security, account for inmates, and enforce rules and regulations, preventing disturbances, assaults, or escapes. They search inmates and their quarters, examine mail and visitors for illegal imports, and settle inmates clashes. Usually unarmed, they often work cellblocks alone or with one other officer mingling with 50 to 100 inmates (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2000-01). Their daily work conditions extend from tedium to imminently dangerous.

#### Typologies and Attitudes

COs vary widely in their beliefs and support for rehabilitative ideals. In attempting to identify effective COs, Schuerger, Kochevar, and Reinwald (1982) found that efficient COs possessed good self-control, low anxiety, introversion, intelligence, conservatism, and self-sufficiency. Successful females were similar, but lower on dominance and suspicion. In Canadian institutions, COs differed from other corrections personnel, presenting the least organizational commitment, the greatest skepticism about organizational change, the most negative attitudes towards a corrections career and belief in rehabilitation, the lowest levels of job satisfaction, the least involvement in their jobs, and the poorest work habits and overall job performance (Robinson, Porporino, and Simourd, 1996). Only a small percentage of the variance in corrections orientation—containment versus rehabilitation—is explainable by work and individual variables (Cullen, Lutze, Link, and Wolfe, 1989), leaving much research to be updated and factors to be identified.

#### Suicide, Stressors, and Burnout

Suicide is a significant factor among COs, being 39% higher compared to the working age population (Stack & Tsoudis, 1997). High CO turnover has been associated with race, ineffectiveness in institutional input, unsatisfactory working conditions, perceived loss of authority due to a lack of support and distance from superiors, and a lack of modern management techniques (Jurik & Winn, 1987; Pogrebin, 1987).

Burnout is associated more with work environments than staff characteristics or inmate relationships (Gerstein, Topp, & Correll, 1987). Poor architectural institutional design contributes towards CO isolation, anxiety over safety, inmate suicides, and the inability to adequately supervise inmates (Atlas, 1989). Low work and family social support create the greatest emotional distress (Seifert, 1995). CO stress coping follows traditional sex roles with females

seeking social support while males strategize and problem-solve (Hurst, Hurst, & Mallory, 1997).

Other stressors and dangers include escape attempts, communicable diseases, segregating prisoners with AIDS, adequacy of health care, rapes by inmates with HIV/AIDS or physical assaults on COs, and the risk of inmate death through positional asphyxia, i.e., when an inmate is "hog-tied" (Rosazza, 1996).

### **Privatizing Prisons**

The concept of private prisons re-emerged during the 1980s. However, roughly three per cent of adult prisoners are currently in privately-run prisons. Private sector prisons do not appear to differ radically from better-managed publicly-funded institutions. However, little attention has been given to researching private sector approaches to innovation or its impact on the practices of the public sector: "Unproven is the private sector's efficiencies and improved management deliver reduced reoffending" ([www.opseu.org/ops/ministry/report/section2.htm](http://www.opseu.org/ops/ministry/report/section2.htm)).

### **Observations**

Since 1980, the number of adults in corrections has tripled, with over 6.3 million people under some corrections supervision in 1999 (Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs)). It can be no surprise, then, that stress is an occupational hazard. Veteran COs report greater stress now, in contrast to ten or twenty years ago, due to cultural diversity, increased negative publicity, public scrutiny, and increased civil suits. In response, the U.S. Congress authorized the Law Enforcement Family Support program (LEFS; 1994) to reduce the harmful effects of stress on law enforcement officers and their families (also see The National Institute of Justice: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/clefs\\_le.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/clefs_le.htm)).

Aside from obvious dangers, COs may become isolated from his/her family or co-workers. Boredom and loneliness are punctuated by unpredictable, traumatizing events. Shiftwork disrupts physical and life rhythms, impacting marriages and families. Admission of emotional stresses may be viewed as a weakness that can lead to a loss of work, the need for a career change, or the mockery of co-workers.

Hidden from public attention/recognition behind walls and razor wire, COs must interact regularly with an antisocial population and inmate economy driven by force, fear, tobacco, drugs, and sexual favors until sensational media reports sporadically bring negative events to public attention.

## Recommendations

- Changes in corrections work resulted in pre-employment psychological evaluation guidelines proposed (1998) by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACPS) ([www.theiacp.org/div\\_sec\\_com/Sections/Psych\\_Srvcs/preemployment.htm](http://www.theiacp.org/div_sec_com/Sections/Psych_Srvcs/preemployment.htm)). The procedure detects applicants best capable of performing CO functions and identifies those with undesirable psychological traits. Licensed psychologists experienced in law enforcement conduct pre-employment testing, supplemented by job analysis, interviews, or surveys.
- Vulnerable employees have been coerced into dishonesty for personal gain, due to occupational stress, or a blurring of the boundary between a CO and an inmate "friend". This accentuates the need for recognition and reward of officers and underscores the need for consistently monitored occupational standards (McCafferty, Souryal, & McCafferty, 1998) by administration and professional staff.
- Team-building or a mentoring system is a necessity, preparing staff for greater responsibilities, facilitating communications, and utilizing the skills and knowledge of experienced staff (Wittenberg, 1998).
- A comprehensive strategy to assist COs should include stress awareness, management training, and some means by which employees may safely and confidentially seek assistance (Bromley & Blount, 1997).
- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) was introduced more than fifteen years ago to prevent or allay traumatic stress. Critical incidents produce emotional reactions with the potential for inhibiting a worker's ability to function either at the scene or later (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH]). Although CISD lessens the impact of distressing critical incidents on personnel exposed to them, accelerating recovery before harmful reactions damage the performance, careers, health, and families of personnel involved, it has not been utilized consistently. (Hayes, 1997).

Although spotty and halting, progress in corrections is evident although, overall, systems still reflect traditional, structured, authoritarian organizations. It will be many years until outmoded, penal monoliths are modified into more dynamic, research-supported structures/programs blending containment and rehabilitation. With such changes, the task analysis of CO's role will diversify into an array of speciality roles including enforcement, surveillance, logistical, technical, interactive, and administrative tasks (Pintrich, 1996; Schaufeli, & Peeters, 2000).

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Questions:

1. Suicide among Correction Officers is
  - a. Lower than the working age population.
  - b. About the same as than the working age population.
  - c. Higher than the working age population.
  - d. So infrequent as to pose no problem.

(Answer c)

2. One research study shows that, if you want to be a Correction Officer, it would be best to be
- a. Gregarious
  - b. Innovative
  - c. Extraverted
  - d. Introverted

(Answer d)