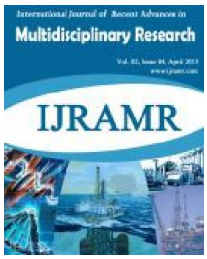

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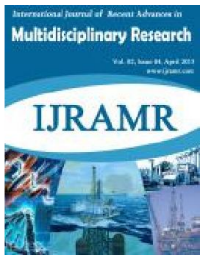

Review Article

WORKING IN A PRISON ENVIRONMENT: HOW SAFE ARE THE PRISON WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Growing inmate population in the United States may give rise to fear among correctional officers about their personal workplace safety in the federal prison system. This potential threat of injury for correction officers is further heightened by the fact that they are required to deal with violent people and conditions on a daily basis. The nature of the threat facing corrections officers is also complex and varied. For instance, correctional staff may be threatened by inmates who create homemade weapons.The article described: one; the current literature that addresses fears of correctional officers about their workplace safety, and two; evaluated potential fears correctional officers may have as inmate population growth increases in the prison system.

INTRODUCTION

The growing inmate's population problem in the United States has reached an alarming stage with the issue becoming a source of concern to the government, law makers, researchers, and most importantly, correction officers who work directly with these inmates (Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Delprino, 2001; Brough and Williams, 2007; Berg, 2008). A 2008 pew research center study report revealed that the United States imprisons more people than any other nation in the world (Alarid and Marquart, 2009; Berg, 2008). Another findings from the study showed that 1 in every 100 adults in the United States now lives behind bars (Alarid and Marquart, 2009; Berg, 2008). Because of government aggressive policy of incarceration rather than rehabilitation, the federal, states, and county jails are experiencing an increase in inmate's population geometrically (Berg, 2008). According to the 2009 Bureau of Prisons quick fact report, it is expected that by 2015, the United States prison population will increase by 13 %, bringing the total number of prison inmates to about 1.7 million (BOP, 2009). In addition, the increase in inmates' population according to the report is projected to cost tax payers a whopping sum of $27.5 billion besides another 4 million who will be on parole and probation (BOP, 2009).

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In contrast, the number of correctional officers working in federal, states, and counties is not a match for the increasing number of inmates that are behind the walls every year (Castle and Martin, 2006). Paoline, Lambert, and Hogan (2006) summed it best when they wrote that "Correctional employees are as much imprisoned as their captives and a very real pain of that imprisonment is interaction with less than desirable persons" (p.54). Working in such a violent environment day after day is stressful and frustrating for correctional officers and can affect their life styles, careers, family life, marriage, and other personal and social life outside of the confines of the institutional walls (Brough and Williams, 2007, Delprino, 2001).There are many problems associated with increasing inmate's population (Mills, 2007). First, it costs tax payers money. Second, when prisons are over populated, correctional officers safety is continuously at risk because they are for most part of the day isolated from law-abiding citizens to confront the dangers caused by prison overcrowding (Marion and Oliver, 2006). Correctional administrators have unanimously agreed that increasing inmate's population can lead to tension, frustration, anger, low morale, apathy, depression, and suicide among officers (Brough and Williams 2007; Whiteacre, 2006). Over all, correctional officers oversee inmates of jails and prisons, and are responsible for enforcing the rules of their captivity. As a profession, corrections work is one of the most stressful in law enforcement (Dowden and Tellier, 2004). Officers must remain continually alert during their shifts to avoid being attacked or killed by the offenders that they supervise. The intensity of these environments often prompts

officers to shut down emotionally, reducing their ability to function effectively within the institution (Brough and Williams, 2007). More research is needed to improve the understanding of correctional safety, its effects, and how it can be effectively managed.

Current Literature on Correctional Officers Perceived Fears about Their Workplace

Correction agencies are distinguished from other typical agencies in that people do not willingly come to prisons as they are forcibly brought through the gates with a view of preventing them from leaving by correctional officers, fences, and walls (Marion and Oliver, 2006, p. 402). The inmates are required to live according to the dictates of correctional administrators while inside the prison, a situation that make the job of correctional officers dangerous and risky as they have to constantly confront these dangerous inmates on a daily basis (p.402). The growing inmates' population in the United States has created a prison environment that is dangerous and hostile for correctional officers who work there (Delprino, 2001). Correctional officers and personnel want the society to recognize that they are a vital part of law enforcement who wants a safe and secure workplace (Camp and Lambert, 2006; Castle and Martin, 2006). The issue of perceived fears correctional officers have about their workplace has attracted interests from researchers, government, and the academic world (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006). At the center of the perceived fear is work related stress that has to do with under staffing, accusation of sexual misconduct and bribery, mandatory overtime, inadequate pay, shift work, problem and conflict with inmates, and little or no autonomy to manage inmates (Kallestad, 2006;Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006, and Mills, 2007). Correctional work is often dangerous and hard. The job holds little or no prestige in society (Kallestad, 2006). At the same time, it is a rather calm and routine job characterized by occasional crisis leading to the realization that studying the attitudes and perceptions of correctional officers is critical.

Many in the academic world have written on the subject of correctional officers and stress (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006; Castle and Martin, 2006). Prison life for many inmates is characterized by violence, manipulation, indoctrination, gangs, and sexual assault. For the correctional officer, prison life is a life of force and confrontation where their mental and physical state is always tested daily (Lambert *et al*, 2009).Stress has been defined as; the interaction between the environment and the individual, an individual attribute, a response, or as a stimulus. However, in relation to correction as an employee, stress is a frustration, worry, emotional exhaustion, tension, anxiety, and a stimulus that interferes or disturbs with normal physiological equilibrium of an organism (Lambert *et al*, 2009). The consequences of stress to correctional officers includes but not limited to health, social, and mental problems. Correctional officers perceive their jobs as stressful and dangerous because of the potential threats of violence and other hazards associated with the job (Mills, 2007; Herbeck, 2008; Castle and Martin, 2006). Employment in correction is also stressful because correctional officers deal with inmates who have a history where violence, confrontation, and fear were present (Castle and Martin, 2006; Armstrong and Griffin, 2004). Inmate overcrowding, dangerous gang activity, increased inmates violence, lack of recognition of officer authority, and physical setting are some of the perceived fears correctional officers have about their workplace safety (Green, 2006). Other sources of concerns are: the concentration of inmates in certain areas of the facility such as visit room, mess hall, and the yard considered to be the hotspots for violence (Herbeck, 2008). Additionally, attacks on property and person within and outside the facility are common because inmates are bored and frustrated (Lambert *et al*, 2009). Working from shift to shift and sometimes irregular work schedules, correctional workers are tasked with the responsibility of policing violent subculture. Subjecting themselves to this violent subculture daily is a stressor in the life and career of correctional officers that can cause them to experience health problems, shorter life span, and on the average die young (Paoline *et al*, 2006). Domestic affairs are not only the reciprocity of this stress, but can be the cause of stress as well (Pollack, 2011). According to Pollack (2011) " Correctional officers frequently reported letting out tensions at the wrong place (at home), tightening discipline at home, and spending less time at home on their days off" (p. 213).

Correctional officers stress literature has examined social support and its effect on job satisfaction Lambert *et al*. (2009) and found one main aspects of social support relevant to the correctional officer. The source of the social support comes from the supervisory and management staff. Herbeck, as cited in (Lambert *et al*, 2009) found that those social support systems operating within the work environment have a significant effect on correctional officer stress. Similarly, Whitecare (2006) conducted a study on community corrections staff job satisfaction by surveying staff at the Salvation Army Correctional Services in Chicago. The survey was administered to staff at a monthly meeting and participation was voluntary. Forty-five (45) surveys were returned, with a response rate of about 54%. The survey was formatted very closely to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Social climate survey. The BOP administers a climate survey each year to their employees. Findings from the research revealed that most correctional officers felt that their careers were stagnantat a rate of 54%. An increase in job stress due to dealing with the offenders with poor attitudes in the program was found as well. Tewssbury and Higgins (2006) conducted research on the influence of emotional dissonance, organizational fairness, and job feedback on correctional officers. Six hundred and fifty (650) surveys were administered to correctional staff at several Kentucky prisons with a 35% response rate. Higgins and Tewksbury (2006, p.212) wrote the following:

- Not surprisingly, the results of this analysis show that work stress is primarily generated by organizational issues rather than time spent with inmates. Specifically, when the correctional staff has to "fake" the proper organizational response (i.e. emotional dissonance), the correctional staff experiences work stress.

Griffin et al, (2010) listed conditions that gave rise to long term correctional officer's stress to include three organizational factors. First is pressure designed to force them to resign; Second, no support in dealing with public problems with visitors, protesters, and press; and third, no backing when attacked or goaded by inmates. They found that majority of the stressors facing correctional employees identified are those the correctional officers has little or no control, adding that organizational responses to these stressors might benefit

officer's health, job satisfaction, and efficiency. Cornelius (2008) pointed out three basic steps supervisors can take to assist in corrections officers stress reduction to include: controlling their own stress, helping and recognizing stressed out employees cope with their stress, and improving physical conditions, as well as the mental outlook of workers. Morgan, Van Haven, and Pearson (2002) conducted a research that explored previous studies of correction employee's stress and the inconsistent results that followed. They listed 10 out of the 32 primary stressors as identified in a study by North Carolina Division of Prisons. Morgan *et al* (2002) listed the first as general stress which is the most significant sources emanating from inmates. They listed the second source as originating from role definition during crises and expectations of job performance. Third stressor as emanating from poor control due to overcrowding, understaffing, and the need to for structure in the correctional facility. According to Morgan *et al*. (2002), the fourth stressor is increased when correctional management does not provide a forum for offices to voice their concerns about their personal safety and other concerns.

The fifth stressor has to do with isolation and personal problems associated with work environment. The sixth stressor has to do with officers work related pressure such as workloads that are rigid. The seventh, discomfort the officers felt because of the amount of work they were expected to perform. The eight stressors were created by inmates setting officers up, couple with the difficulty of giving inmates orders. The ninth stressor was that the community does not respect the job correctional officers are doing. And finally, officers found that preventing escapes was a further source of stress (p.112-223). Castle and Martin, 2006; Keinan and Malach-Pines (2007) all agreed that employment in correction is stressful in the sense that officers are dealing with people who have a history of violence and confrontation. Mills (2007) postulated that the two primary life domains for most adults are work and home, including those who work in the field of corrections. Conflict can arise when home and work spill over into one another (Mills, 2007). This is known as work-family conflict. The work-family conflict affects the correctional officer and his or her family. Essentially, work-family conflict occurs when the two primary focuses in a person's life (i.e., work and family) are incompatible and therefore cause conflict that leads to spillovers into both the work and familial/social life (Mills, 2007). In the end, this leads to stress for the individual. In other words, family matters have the tendency of impacting work performance (Mills, 2007; Berg, 2008; Castle and Martin, 2006). Studies on work - family – conflict were an issue for correctional officers with the levels of conflict varying by personal characteristics (Lambert *et al*, 2009; Mills, 2007). Job related stress and satisfaction with correctional officers has been negatively associated with work-family-conflict (Lambert *et al*, 2009; Mills, 2007).

Perceived dangerousness of the job is a potential precedent of work-family-conflict because working in a correctional setting is often viewed as risky, dangerous due to threats by inmates and actual inmate's violence that follows such threats (Castle and Martin, 2006; Whiteacre, 2006). Studies have shown that perceived dangerousness of the job is linked with lower job satisfaction and increased job stress for many correctional personnel (Berg, 2008; Castle and Martin, 2006). Another potential antecedent of work-family – conflict is role strain. Role strain come when a worker's responsibilities and duties are ill-defined, ambiguous, and vague, and when directives are contradictory and inconsistent (Brough and Williams, 2007). Role conflict and role ambiguity are the two major forms of role strain. Role ambiguity is seen as uncertainty or lack of information in carrying out spelt out duties and responsibilities of a given job (Brough and Williams, 2007). Role conflict, on the other hand is defined as occurring when behaviors for a given job is inconsistent with one another (Brough and Williams, 2007). Both role conflict and ambiguity could lead a correctional staff to experience work-family-conflict (Brough and Williams, 2007). Workers who suffer from both role conflict and ambiguity will be stressed, and this situation is likely to spillover and cause problem at home.

Employees want to have a say in their jobs and organizations. In other words, they want input into decision making process of the organization they work for (Dowden and Tellier, 2004; Berg, 2008; Mills, 2007). Lack of decision-making has been found to be positively associated with job stress and negatively related with job satisfaction and organizational commitment among correctional workers (Griffin *et al*, 2010).Lack of fairness, equity, and justice are some of the other perceived fears of correctional personnel as inmate's population increases. A successful organization need to be perceived as fair and just to its employees (Herbeck, 2008). This is often referred to as justice in literature. According to Herbeck (2008) distributive and procedural justices are the two major dimensions of organizational justice. While distributive justice is seen as the perception of fairness in the distribution and allocations of outcomes within an organization based on inputs by an employee, procedural justice is the perception of fairness of the process and procedures used to arrive at organizational outcomes (Herbeck, 2008). Correctional workers want to be treated fairly and justly at their work. Both forms of organizational justice have been found to have positive impacts on correctional officer's job satisfaction and organization justice (Lambert*et al*, 2009). Any perceptions of unfair outcomes and procedures can lead to resentment, which in turn can increase the amount of work-family-conflict experienced by correctional workers (Lambert *et al*, 2009). Negative consequences, including poor job performance, physical and mental illness, and strain in personal relationships, as well as premature death have been linked to stress and job dissatisfaction (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006)). In contrast, job satisfaction has been linked with positive results, which includes decreased feelings of role conflict and greater job participation (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006).Employment within a correctional institution involves working with inmates that are hostile, inherent job danger, shift work, as well as mandatory or optional overtime (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006). Research has shown that shift work can be especially challenging for officers who have families and for singles with small children (Keinan and Malach-Pines, 2007). Shift rotations often affect their families. In areas that have a high concentration of prisons, entire communities can be affected. Of great concern to correctional officers is the issue of irregular shift work, especially for those with little or no seniority whose day care schedule could conflict with their work schedule (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006). Findings from studies carried out by Griffin *et al* (2010) to determine the impact of irregular work schedule for law enforcement officers, including correctional officers revealed that shift work can have negative

effects on the body because of sleep deprivation. Scott, as cited in (Green, 2006) listed six symptoms of 'shift lag" to include; impaired performance, irritability, gastrointestinal dysfunction, apathy, sleeping at work, and depression. Scott concluded that in the case of female officers, health problems such as spontaneous abortion could occur (Green, 2006). Finally, Garland et al, (2009) conducted a survey research on 83 correctional treatment staff in a Midwestern state with a return rate of 52 %. The 41 item survey aimed to measure burn out among correctional treatment specialist. The independent variable in the survey was administrative support. Like findings from other researches, Garland et al, (2009) determined that the amount of time spent with the 18 inmate population did not have a big effect as most would think. According to Garland et al, (2009) 53 % of respondents reported job assignments and functions as the cause for stress and burnout.

Potential fears of correctional officers as inmate population growth increases

Correctional officers have a cause to worry as prison inmates population continues to grow. The effect of increasing prison inmate's population can lead to violence within the institution, between inmates or between inmates and correctional officers on one hand and health problem for both inmates and staff on the other (Marion and Oliver, 2005, p.418).With the increasing inmate's population, correctional agencies across the United States face a tremendous challenge in the staffing of existing facilities and those currently under construction (Marion and Jones, 2006; Mills, 2007; Berg, 2008). The growth is driving the demand for more workloads from the already overstretched staff as some of the experienced ones are expected to retire. According to the National Institute of Correction, it is projected that about 60% of the top level management and staff in jail and prison will be eligible to retire in the coming four years (Garland, 2009). In addition, the demand for correctional officers is growing annually, adding to the burden of staff training and human resources. The number of correctional officers recruited annually is not matching up in proportion with inmates increase (Berg, 2008; Castle and Martin, 2006). The implication of this is that staffs are burn out and the working environment becomes stressful, thereby forcing correctional employees to consider other workplace options (Green, 2006). With many states executives seeking to balance their budgets by cutting programs deemed unviable, losses in the funding of correctional agencies could lead to staff rationalization such as job losses, cuts in benefits, and hours of work, which could mean longer working hours, irregular work schedules, and salary reduction in correctional organizations (Lambert *et al*, 2009). Research shows a disturbing trend that more inmates are returning to prison (Lambert *et al*, 2009). A 2011 Bureau of justice Statistics Reports revealed that as of December 2010, the United States has approximately 1.8 million people behind bars, with about 100,000 in federal prison, 1.1 million in state prison, and 600,000 in local jails. The United States ranks number one in incarceration now than any other country of the world (Marion and Jones, 2006). No other country has ever imprisoned many of its citizens for the purpose of crime control (Lambert, *et al*, 2009). America's prisons are more than ever overcrowded and the inmate's population continues to rise yearly by 50, 000 to 80,000 (Lambert *et al*, 2009). The impact of this development to correctional officers is that it has the potential to lead to a strained relationship between inmates and staff, long working hours, denial of leave, compulsory overtime, burnout and stress, thereby creating a more volatile place to work (Lambert *et al*, 2009).

Negative work environment and frustration with work situations are some other perceived fears of correctional staff as inmates' population continues to grow (Marion and Oliver, 2006). Staffs are irate and angry when allegations are leveled against them either by inmates or by other staff (Delprino, 2001; Brough and Williams, 2007). In addition, negative workplace environment where hate, fear, violence, bullying, coupled with absence of care and tenderness are all sources of concerns for correctional officers (Tewksbury and Higgins, 2006). Individuals who find their jobs rewarding and interesting tend to be more satisfied. Citing various articles and research literature to buttress their point, Griffin et al (2010) postulated that work environment has been identified as a significant predictor of job satisfaction. Any cut or anticipated cut in funding for prison programs will affect their work environment and make correctional officers' job to be in jeopardy (Griffin et al, 2010). The concerns or fears correctional officers have about their workplace are many. In a survey conducted to by (Lambert et al, 2009) to determine some of the perceived concerns correctional officers have about their workplace, over 98 % of the respondents agreed that risk of injury comes top on their lists. Many inmates are aggressive and violent offenders, especially those serving their jail terms in maximum security prisons. The researcher concluded that correctional officers risks being attacked and are vulnerable without weapons while working in these facilities. Risk of false accusations is, yet other common concern correctional officers have about their workplace as postulated by (Green, 2006). Any false accusation made by a prisoner against correctional officers can prompt an investigation into their personal conduct. Prisoners have a right too. The implication of this is that false accusations such as sexual and physical abuse could be leveled against any staff that may have treated them in a wrong way and this could be an embarrassing and traumatic experience investigation (Green, 2006). In addition, they have the tendency of being targeted or attacked outside of their working environment by gang members that are out on the streets. Also, correctional officers and members of their families' risks being taken hostages for a ransom by gang members who may want to settle some scores with them (Lambert *et al*, 2009). The nature and history of violence of some inmates calls for perceived fears from correctional officers as inmates population increases in that staff will have the responsibility of managing defiant , violent, and mentally ill offenders, who resent their loss of freedom and may attempt to attack staffs that are exposed to them (Marion and Oliver, 2006). Even with management efforts to improve safety in the workplace, prisons are not always safe. Concerns about safety discourages potential applicants pool from choosing corrections as a career (Lambert *et al*, 2009) while those already employed in the system leave for other jobs deemed safe as research has found that strain is produced when employees duties are ill defined, inconsistent, ambiguous, or contradictory, leading to less job satisfaction (Lambert *et al*, 2009).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper examined the growing prison inmates increase in the United States, as well as how they contributed to the perceived fears correctional officers have about their workplace safety.

The paper has also looked at what might become the fate of correctional officers as prison inmates population continues to grow. The Knowledge of and ability to understand the antecedents of correctional employee affective states, attitudes, and behaviors is critical for all parties involved, including correctional employees ,correctional administrators, academicians, inmates, and society in general. The paper supports the premise that job stress, supervision, job variety, and job autonomy are critical aspects of the work environment which impact correctional staff. The effects of job characteristics on correctional staff should not be ignored by future research on correctional staff or by correctional administrators. Correctional officers are the heart and souls of correctional agencies (Herbeck, 2008; Marion and Oliver, 2006; Mills, 2007). In summary, employees are at the heart and soul of any correctional facility. Correctional facilities succeed or fail because of their staff. Working in corrections is abounding with opportunities for work-family conflict (Griffin *et al*, 2010). It is only in the last decade that there has been empirical research on Work on Family Conflict among correctional staff. This small, but growing body of research has mainly examined the consequences of Work on Family Conflict. It has been found that Work on Family Conflict leads to greater job stress, lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment among correctional workers.

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