



A Phenomenological Study of Stress Among Ex-Correctional Officers in Georgia

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examined the perceived work-related stress among ex-correctional officers in the state correctional facility in Georgia. Using the purposive sample of 12 correctional officers in Georgia, the study delineated five themes from the responses of the study subjects: (1) work stress theme; (2) working with male inmates theme; (3) emotional dissonance theme; (4) cause and effect health and stress theme; and (5) stress relief theme. The main triggers of work-related stress were found to be associated with (a) leadership changes, (b) inmate behavior and manipulation, and (c) job responsibilities, hours worked, mandatory overtime, impromptu shifts, etc. The study also examined how the stress experienced by the study subjects may have impacted them in their post-employment. While many of these findings are consistent with earlier research, the strength of this study lies in the responses of former correctional officers, who were free to express their views candidly without fear of retaliation or retribution, unlike those in service and actively employed in the field. Hence their responses should be taken seriously into account in order to increase the effectiveness of the performance of correctional officers by addressing the issues and problems identified herein. Unless their message is heeded and acted upon, correctional officers' stress levels and turnover rate are likely to remain high and their retention is likely to be low.

Introduction

The Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) is made up of 33 state prison sites, of which four are female facilities and the remaining 29 are male facilities. Each site can accommodate 700-2300 offenders. Among the GDC staff, correctional officers comprise the largest percentage (78%) and over one-half (about 53%) them tend to be female. The average age of correctional officers is 36 years. The average vacancy rate for the correctional officer is around 15 percent and their annual turnover rate is over 30 percent. Thus, correctional officer retention and recruitment remains to be major issues for the Department [1].

A large amount of the male prisoner population resides in medium and maximum level prisons for heinous crimes, escape history, or gang affiliation [2]. Georgia ranks fifth in the nation with the largest adult prison population—i.e., under the custody of correctional officers [3]. Correctional officers work within a highly stressful and potentially dangerous environment [4]. Their stress originates from several sources, such as workload responsibilities, the danger

of the job, interaction with inmates, the culture of prisons in terms of following rules and regulations, organizational factors that suppress officer autonomy and discretion, and the changing nature of the workplace with the influx of correctional officers into the field, among others [5-8]. As a result, they face numerous challenges both personally and professionally [9,10]. Administrative investigations, disciplinary processes, and scrutiny from the public and media take a toll on morale among correctional officers [9]. Correctional officers also juggle shift work with mandatory overtime, staffing shortages, and high rates of peer absenteeism [11-13]. The stress associated with the job results in higher-than-average turnover rates in comparison to other government agency jobs [4,14]. As a result, despite slower than average job growth projections, many departments are finding it difficult to maintain stable staffing levels [4,14]. Taxman and Gordon [15] listed the correctional environment as one of the most stressful recorded work environments and noted rates of employee retention between 12 and 15 percent.

Stress has significant negative impacts on the mental and physical health of correctional

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officers [9,10,13,16-18]. Correctional officers have higher rates of heart disease (Brower, 2013) [9], hypertension [19], and obesity than the general population [13]. The impact on overall health is significant; by age 59 the lifespan of a correctional officer is 16 years lower than the national average of their working peers [9,20]. Correctional officers are reported to have high rates of “mental disorders, depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress, and job dissatisfaction” [21] higher than any other occupation, with reported depression rates between 24 to 33 percent [22]. Also, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms have been found in 27 to 35 percent of correctional officers [9,18,22]. These findings highlight the need for effective intervention, as the combination of depression and PTSD symptoms is correlated with an increased risk for suicide [10]. Tiesman and her associates’ study of incarceration rehabilitation revealed correctional officers are four times more likely to die by their own hands than by a felonious act [21]. Due to the unique hazards of corrections, the suicide rate among correctional officers is 39 percent higher than others in the same age group and twice that of police officers [23,24]. The toll on those who take the oath to “serve and protect” is substantial.

This research is driven by the underrepresented review of the raw experiences of former correctional officers, specifically those who have worked with male inmates and may have coped with work-related stress. Noticeably, extensive research can be found on organization commitment among prison staff [25], occupational stress and coping [26], and burnout among correctional officers [27]. While Lambert and Paoline [28] examined fluctuating temperatures and occupational stress, absent from the literature is Georgia-specific research on former correctional officers, the stress that occurred in working with male inmates, and the officers’ ability to adapt while being security-minded after retirement. There is also a lack of qualitative design emphasizing the perspective of previously employed correctional officers (a valuable perspective because they no longer fear reprimand or repercussion). Stakeholders affected by this problem include the current correctional officers, because stress may negatively affect the quality of the officers’ work, retention, personal life, and interpersonal communications.

Methodology

This research was anchored in the theoretical framework of Husserlian phenomenology through a characterization provided by Crowell [29] for the following reasons. First, phenomenology is not based on theory construction, but descriptive in nature. As such, it is necessary to provide a clear and careful description of what the phenomenon is and how one is to explain the perception. Second, Crowell [29] mentioned that phenomenological descriptions do not try to explain causal laws, but to clarify descriptions and mark distinctions to understand “what it is to be a thing of this or that sort” (p. 10). Third, the horizon or co-given background of phenomenology is not factual inquiry, but eidetic, where a concrete act of perception seeks to describe the properties to the person. Finally, the reflective inquiry of phenomenology is concerned with our experiences of entities and not concerned with the entities themselves, unlike the natural sciences. As Crowell [29] stated, “This allows phenomenology to break decisively with concepts and representation and explore meaning as encountered directly in the world of our practical

and perceptual life” (p. 11), giving justice to meaning, and breaking free from the traditional rigors of science.

Research Design

As a first step of phenomenology, eidetic reduction was used to identify the basic components of the lived experience [30]. Bracketing, in this process, is an essential method for vivid recall by asking what some of the non-changing aspects of the phenomenon are and grouping all incidental meanings and trends.

A second step of the phenomenological approach is the use of narrative analysis, specifically ethnomethodology or conversational analysis, which was used to analyze the subjective thoughts of former correctional officers for their sources of stress and their personal strategies used to deal with work-related stress as a research design. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 former correctional officers (a cross-sectional approach based on the criteria of race, gender, and time-in-service) who were previously active correctional officers and had a minimum of ten years’ experience in a Georgia prison facility. Because no other statewide qualitative study, conducted using former correctional officers’ addresses has been in literature, the essence of how work-related stress was managed, their perceptions and interpretations of stress were most important. Furthermore, the auditory observations of the former correctional officers during the phone interview process were difficult. Although interviews per se were not recorded, specific pauses, detailed responses, discussion, and deviations from the topic, etc. were documented.

Finally, the purposive sampling was employed for recruiting the study subjects. Leedy and Ormrod [31] suggested the use of this sampling method in research for a particular purpose where the research participants are selected based on criteria fitting the research agenda. Berg [32] also noted that, “... researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population.” It enabled to examine the former correctional officer’s perspective while working with male inmates and the essence of their stress experiences at work.

Sampling Design

The population from which the participants for this study were drawn are former correctional officers who were previously active correctional officers and had a minimum of ten years’ experience in a Georgia prison facility in the United States. The 12 former correctional officers who participated in the semi-structured interview on work-stress and adaptability gave consent to participate voluntarily in the study. All participants were transparent and willing to openly share stress triggers experienced, and their view on work-related stress.

Data Collection Procedures

The research interviews were conducted via telephone, to encourage more participation and a higher sample size; the data collection procedures included the documented responses of participants. The telephone interviews took place in the Henry County Library in a private area that provided confidentiality and privacy, for the interviewer. The participants were described by a penname (e.g., Dan, Natalee,

and so on) to maintain anonymity of personal identifiers or shared information. The observation of themes and response notes were reviewed following each interview to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis Procedures

The essence of how former correctional officers dealt with work-related stress while working with male inmates was accomplished with the use of narrative analysis, or the condition of social life in the lived experience [33]. This was accomplished with the former correctional officers as the storytellers providing their personal work experiences and subjective observations through semi-structured interviews. Through conversational analysis of phenomenology, the research focused on emotional management/emotional regulation, or how former correctional officers “recognized, described, explained, and accounted for their work experiences.” It also focused on how they coped with work-related stresses [34] and applied meaning to their subjective lived experiences.

Assumptions of Study

There were three assumptions for this study. First, it was assumed phenomenological that while research seeks descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants (former correctional officers) in daily work with male inmates, a transparent understanding of work with male inmates could only come from former officers who worked in these types of facilities, because an extensive review of the literature failed to find studies from the perspective of former officers and their stress in working with male inmates. Second, it was assumed that all participants would provide honest responses in answering open-ended interview questions to discover the extent of officer stress as they dealt with male inmates. It was assumed that the correctional officers who volunteered had knowledge, experience, and the ability to contribute to this study, answer questions, and provide feedback. Third, it was assumed that a semi-structured interview would promote more depth from the participant responses due to the dynamic

nature of questioning. For example, questions were reworded/rephrased, and probing questions were asked of participants [32] to accommodate more discussion.

Findings

The study participants consisted of 12 ex-correctional officers, of whom seven were women and five were men; three were whites and nine were African Americans. All aged between 40- 69 years and served between 10 to 23 years as correctional officers in the state of Georgia. Their work responsibilities varied between the subjects and over their duration of employment as correctional officers. The correctional officers could work at the tower, cellblock, mess hall, perimeter, rounds, walkway, recreation, or infirmary, at any given moment. Three participants reported that they had specific relief jobs that required them to fill jobs when officers in those positions have days off; these jobs consist of cellblocks, walkways, recreation, sally ports (entrances) and mess halls. The perspective of the participants suggest that these areas were considered most dangerous due to the staff-inmate interaction, at any given time. Only two participants reported working on a cellblock as their sole responsibility. Therefore, all these jobs require significant contact with male inmates. Ten participants reported that they have 15+ years of experience as a correctional officer and 2 participants reported that they have less than 15 years of experience as a correctional officer within the prison, however they completed their tenure in leadership at Central Office. None of the participants had less than 10 years of experience as a correctional officer. Table 1 provides the list of participants by their pseudonym and corresponding profile.

Responses of the below study participants yielded five recognizable themes: (1) work stress theme; (2) working with male inmates theme; (3) emotional dissonance theme; (4) cause and effect health and stress theme; and (5) stress relief theme. Table 2 shows the response patterns of the former correctional officers in terms of their stress sources, coping methods after encountering stress, and their post-employment adaptations.

Table 1. Participants by pseudonym and profile

Number	Pseudonym	Profile
1	Dorothy	A 63-year-old Black woman, employed for 19 years in corrections as a correctional officer. She resigned after being injured in a gang related fight amongst inmates, though not considered disabled by the state of Georgia.
2	Lynn	A 61-year-old Black woman, employed for 20 years in corrections as a correctional officer. She retired after a dotting career of accolades and promotions. Starting career in corrections at the age of 30 years, she soon became pregnant and had no support from family. She characterized her work experience as “bittersweet” – a combination of mixed experiences, career mobility, and monetary benefits.
3	Nancy	A 59-year-old White woman with 15 years of service in corrections as a correctional officer, who left corrections in 2010 and sought career change for more suitable hours to support her children’s needs and activities. Nancy was more vocal about her unchanging dislike for the correctional system, the danger, and working with inmates.
4	Janie	A 57-year-old Black woman, who spent 18 years in corrections as a correctional officer. She grew up with parents, who also worked in the correctional system. Her father retired as a Deputy Warden and her mother, a nurse, was killed in a car accident while leaving a facility in 1983. She characterized her experiences as mostly positive, though her personal life had been seemingly affected by the penal system.
5	Jeff	A 60-year-old White man with 21 years of experience in corrections as both a correctional officer and correctional officer supervisor. While Jeff was retired from corrections, he built a legacy of supporting inmates in the process of their re-entry into society. Jeff’s sister was killed in 2000, during a robbery, in another state.

Number	Pseudonym	Profile
6	Pam	A 47-year-old Black woman, who worked for 13 years in corrections as a correctional officer and left the position for pursuing a law degree. An ardent advocate on inmate issues, Pam believes that inmate conditions are the root cause of the stressful situations for correctional officers.
7	Elaine	A 40-year-old Black woman, who spent 12 years in corrections as a correctional officer and took another state position in 2015 that allowed her to spend more time with her son with special needs. Elaine believed that the moments of danger and circumstances she experienced prompted for a career change and that she made a right decision at a right time.
8	Natolie	A 50-year-old Black woman, worked for 20 years in corrections as a correctional officer and retired in 2017, volunteers at present with women’s groups to assist struggling women to rejoin society successfully after incarceration, especially those with drug use history. She joined corrections after her sister was incarcerated for drug trafficking in 1999. Natolie saw her sister’s unsuccessful long struggle for recovery, despite accepting the responsibility of raising her nephew as a way to assist her sister.
9	Cole	A 53-year-old Black man that spent 23 years employed in corrections as a correctional officer. While Cole retired in 2015, he remains connected with volunteer services and employee aid programs to assist correctional officers.
10	Gary	A 52-year-old Black man that spent 15 years employed in corrections as a correctional officer. Interestingly, Gary was employed in another state as a correctional officer then moved to Georgia after getting his girlfriend pregnant in 1995. Gary left his previous state to stay closer to his daughter, at the time. He is very vocal about his perception of stress.
11	Dean	A 69-year-old Black man that spent 22 years employed in corrections as a correctional officer. Dean began his correctional career after his return from war. His lens was on both war and peace within the prison environment.
12	Glenn	A 50-year-old Black man, served as correctional officer for 15 years in corrections, is also a minister. He left corrections in 2014 due to feelings of burnout and lack of connection with his family. Glenn shared that he was on his way to a high position and promotion but chose his family instead.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by source of stress, post-stress encounter coping, and post-employment adaptation

Themes	Responses	Number (Percent)
Source of Stress:	Inmate Behavior Manipulation	7 (58%)
	Leadership (poor leadership, lack of support, lack of trust)	11 (92%)
	Job responsibilities/Hours Worked	8 (67%)
Post-Stress Encounter Coping	Stress Eating	2 (17%)
	Smoking	6 (50%)
	Excessive Drinking	3 (25%)
	Time off/extended breaks	2 (17%)
	Family Time	6 (50%)
	Sports	2 (17%)
	Travel	2 (17%)
Post-employment adaptation	Socializing/Nightlife	1 (8%)
	Dislike for Corrections	6 (50%)
	Disconnected Emotionally	5 (42%)
	Pushed to Advocacy	1 (8%)

Work Stress Theme

A variety of sources are likely to cause stress among correctional officers. Participants viewed work environment to be stressful not from a single source, but from a collection/combination of sources that are consistent with previous research, i.e., inmates’ manipulation/safety, correctional administration, and the workload/responsibilities of the

correctional officer, and the like [35-42]. Clearly, their stress accumulation depended on the number of stressful situations they encountered and the years of their experience in correctional facility. The study subject identified many sources of stress during interviews and said that correctional administration (leadership) was their greatest source of stress in the correctional environment followed by inmate manipulation. One of the most significant findings was that all participants communicated that their main source of stress, surprisingly, came from correctional administration, as they believed that their actions or lack thereof were scrutinized, or that administration would often side with the inmate without thorough consideration, or as one participant recalled “lack of support” in incidents of allegation or safety with male inmates. As one respondent explained:

Most of the stress that I feel from administration is right now, it’s obviously the cameras and the microphones. They always make you think about what you are saying or doing. Obviously for some people and in some situations that I think is a good thing because it will make people think before they act because they gotta think that someone is going to be reviewing this. But it also adds to the stress because you don’t feel as free to say what you really feel like you should say; you have to very careful how you word things. And sometimes these inmates just don’t get it unless you use some terms that they understand. You know, you try to be politically correct in a lot of ways in how you say things. Granted, that’s probably the right way to do it but sometimes they just don’t get it. You know the cameras are going to be used to review things if there is any kind of accusation or any kind of incident. That’s where they [administration] go. The only other stress I get is the different policies that they come up with that seem to just make sense from them, from their point of view behind their desk. But if they ever actually asked a correction

officer that works the job what their opinion is if this policy will work or that policy will work, or some input that will be useful. It's like they don't seem to care, they don't want to know.

Additional issues for participants were workload responsibilities, last minute call ins, feelings of being overworked, and low morale. The recall of low morale seemed to come from those participants that reported working 15+ years or more, in corrections. The participants with longer work experience in corrections recalled moments of burnout, and lower self-care practices due to workload and hours. Conversely, the participants with less time served expressed concerns about male inmates' accusations and the manipulation of both administration and the correctional officers.

Working with Male Inmates Theme

Many participants expressed the memory of stress following a false allegation from an inmate that was upset with a correctional officer, or "just wanted to be entertained". While cameras are now highly prevalent in the facility, inmate accusations, in most cases, require a level of investigation which would send the alleged correctional officer home with no pay, pending the investigation outcome. Five participants remarked that they were expected to play many roles of custodian, counselor, social worker, psychologist, and the constant rule changes made their job particularly difficult and stressful. Participants described how the "mission" would often change with the leadership. The following narrative is representative:

We are expected to wear many hats of security, counselor, social worker, and psychologist. It doesn't make sense. These jobs are in direct contradiction to our security role. We should not be made to fill these roles because we are not trained for these positions, and we should not be expected to perform more than our duties and what we are hired for.

Earlier studies [26,35,37,43-46] discussed the inmate role and correctional officer's stress in terms of violence, manipulation, and infectious diseases. According to the participants, many of the male inmates (both and old) pose unique challenges. Participants stated that while they remember that a majority of the inmates were respectful and had not caused problems such as fights or loud behavior, a few did cause many of the problems: "you would celebrate their transfers". All participants stated that they worked very closely as front-line officers and worked in housing units or walkways daily, with male inmates. However, one problem especially noted by female participants is male inmates exposing their private body parts to female officers on the cellblocks; on occasion, male inmates accused female officers of leering or looking at their exposed bodies.

I don't know if it's too much from the inmates...stupidity usually. Inmates curse at you. Then you got the ones who want to fight with you and have sex with you, the males are brutal. 'Oh, you look hot.' It's stupid comments like that and at first you think it's funny as a young guy or girl but after a while it wears on you. So that's a lot of stress too, the way the inmates are looking at you.

Additionally, all participants previously worked in facilities for male inmates and noted that the tension in the

male facilities was, at times, greater than a correctional facility for female inmates, as far as the threat of violence against other inmates or staff. The participants also noted that male inmates are easier to work with as the male inmate is more compliant, and cleaner compared to female inmates. Participants reported that the tension in a prison for female inmates was not as high and suggested that female inmates are more disrespectful, louder, and complain more often than the males. As one participant stated,

Male inmates were easier. When you tell a male inmate to do something, they do it, they know their place. They know what they're supposed to do you tell them to do it and they do it. They may complain under their breath, but they continue and do what they have to do. Females are always looking for excuses. 'Oh, I'm not feeling well' and they give you a whole list on why they can't mop a floor or pick something up. So, its constant you must use your mind to trick them to get them to do something, so you don't have to listen to it.

Participants said that male inmates attempted to manipulate officers where inmates try to get know their personal business and the male inmates are not so inquisitive. Additionally, participants felt that male inmates manipulated the correctional system to get what they want or to circumvent the rules. Participants described that much of this was attributed to poor correctional management not addressing negative inmate behavior, and fear that not addressing inmate complaints, might negatively affect their jobs. One participant aptly stated, "Every single day, every minute of the day and it's allowed because I think they play on the administrations fear of them being put on the stand. 'Why didn't you do anything about it?' It's about their accountability. That's what I think." Participants viewed inmate manipulation as a negative factor that did not allow correctional officers to be as effective. "Administration gave into inmate demands, which negated the authority of the front-line staff, causing stress."

Emotional Dissonance Theme

Some participants described experiencing an emotional disconnect from corrections, post-employment. Several scholars suggest that correctional officers experience emotional dissonance as a part of daily work life based on dealings with inmates, correctional administration, organizational factors, and sources outside the correctional environment [19,27,37-40,42,47-52]. Based on their experiences as former correctional officers, the participants reported that they often would withhold true feelings when confronted with a stressful situation (emotional dissonance) at work. One participant spoke about the perceived danger in being vulnerable and outspoken around inmates. Participants suggested that inmates would use emotional responses as ammo and some even would view as a weakness. As one participant conveyed:

You really must hide your true feelings because if you really let your true feelings out, you would probably be dismissed, you would probably be terminated, or judged. There's time where if you're a fair individual and you have fair sense towards a person and humanity, there are times you want to be compassionate and if you were to tell your fellow officers or supervisors that you feel sorry for that inmate you would be looked down upon as someone who is weak, soft. You are a soft officer.

Further findings were that participants reported no real connection with other correctional officers aside from professional colleagues. Conversely, the participants said that they were free to complain to other officers about inmates, administration, or outside forms of stress, but would run the risk of the other officer sharing their comments with leadership, or other correctional officers. Participants noted that they were not free to speak their minds about people or situations in the correctional facility even if simply to point out misconceptions because they said that the correctional facility did not support venting by employees.

In terms of role ambiguity and role conflict, both were present according to the participants and part of emotional dissonance. According to the participants, working to keep inmates safe that were convicted of heinous crimes like murder, rape, and kidnapping was always a battle. As stated earlier, they were expected to wear many hats of security, counselor, social worker, and psychologist—causing a role conflict, because it was in direct contradiction to their security role. Moreover, they are not trained for these positions and should not be expected to perform more than roles than their job title and duties. Furthermore, the participants described role ambiguity is a major problem with constant rule changes, correctional administration not reinforcing the rules as written, and not backing officers when they write a misbehavior report. Participants believed that when these changes occurred, it was because correctional administration was codling inmates; participants suggested that it was very difficult to keep up with the constant rule changes and, because the rules changed too often, rule changes were often ignored by officers.

One participant stated, “We always get a bad rap, state officers in general and I’ve read on the Internet where people who don’t have the whole story will start making things up and slamming the officers and they have no idea what they are talking about, or grouping all officers together for the choices of a few: “Completely blown out of the water.” This type of negative stereotyping, participants felt, led/leads to an overall negative public perception of interactions between correctional officers and inmates, and is in part why most correctional officers can’t share their experiences openly with the community. One participant cited the following perceptions:

I think right away the media and the public think and we’re guilty until proven innocent and it goes back to that we’re the bullies that are making them do things they don’t want to do, and they forget they’re felons and that’s pretty much it. You almost feel like you got to prove your innocence before that’ll change rather than they must prove you guilty.

Cause and Effect Health and Stress Theme

Participants described that they have experienced work-related stress from several sources while working with male inmates (due to inmates/inmate manipulation, non-supporting leadership, and ambiguity in role responsibilities, and feeling over worked). Their work stress reportedly extended beyond the correctional environment and spanned into their personal/home life and impacted their physical and mental health. This perception is more frequently expressed by those who served longer term (20+ years) as correctional officers. They felt that their job as a correctional officer effected their family life as their family members had to deal with their

displaced frustration, as an officer. Those served less than 20 years reportedly experienced physiological signs of stress at work, but unsure of bringing the stress and frustration home.

Extant literature is replete with the effects of stress and work in law enforcement, to include corrections, and the physiological and psychological effects of diabetes, heart disease, a shorter life span, drug or alcohol use, avoiding social activities, misplaced aggression, domestic abuse, and divorce [47,53-59]. The three participants with the longest time in service as a correctional officers said that they used sick time because they experience work stress due to inmates, feeling over worked, and supervisors. Stress seemed to weigh on the mental well-being of the shorter tenured whereas senior participants said they were burned out and used sick time for ‘mental health days.’ One participant elaborated:

If you’re just burned out, you feel like you’ve had that long week, that four-days straight and you’ve had nothing but problems at the prison, yeah, it’s frustrating. I call it a mental health day. You need to get away from it and if you don’t take one every now and then you’re really going to snap; you need to take a break. Unfortunately, they don’t give us enough time off in between but you know what? It’s our job and that’s what we took but you also need that break and every now and then it is nice to have that time to take a mental health break, so yes, I did (laughter).

All participants noted that they have experienced physiological signs of stress at work such as racing pulse, sweating, and feeling their blood pressure rise, following an intense interaction with an inmate or a take down or restraint. The main influence seemed to be when inmates’ voices were raised, breaking inmates apart during fights, or incidents (arguments) that involve two or more inmates. The participants described that these issues took a toll on their physical/mental well-being over time, as they sought to cope with their stressful encounters by indulging themselves in stress eating, smoking, and excessive drinking.

In describing their physical and mental stress, participants with more time served seemed to suffer greater levels of stress compared to their junior counterparts with 10-15 years of work experience.

Stress Relief Theme

Participants reportedly coped with work related stress in various ways—by participating in athletic activities, vacationing, spending time with their families, or outside employment. One participant described his activities to relieve stress, thus:

Yeah, I would shoot guns, at the gun range. I like to work with my hands. I do odd construction jobs, around the house, on the side and make some extra cash to relieve my stress. That’s what I use to do to clear my head.

Three of the participants recalled that there was an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) where they could talk to someone about stress, i.e., counseling at little to no cost, however there was a fear or stigma surrounding EAP resources. This is consistent with studies conducted elsewhere by other researchers. For example, McRee [60] noted that “most EAP utilization initiatives fail to address the impact of stigma, misunderstandings about mental illness and the reluctance

of many employees to seek counseling as an option for better management of stress, work-life balance and overall mental wellness” (p.37).

Many employees also expressed concern about the EAP’s inability to prevent leaks of confidential information of its employee participants. This has been a long-standing problem and its importance is further highlighted due to the ever-expanding social media in recent decades. Mistretta and Inlow [61] suggested three remedial steps to increase the effectiveness of the EAP: first, employees must feel confident that the program addresses problems in a professional manner; two, employees must feel protected from retribution and retaliation (job loss, sanctions, or embarrassment); and third, employees must feel that the confidentiality of their communication with EAP professionals and their records are protected (p.84). Brower [9] also recognized that “it is challenging for correctional facilities to find confidential treatment providers who are equipped to address the specific issues and problems facing Cos” (p.8).

All the participants noted that they generally kept discussions about work related stress amongst other officers and to a family member, generally a spouse or significant other. The following response is illustrative:

Mostly during carpool, there were several officers I’d ride with and several I’d talk to at work, and I think the majority of the time, I thought, those were the only people I could relate to about it, you know, dealing with the same thing. We would use the car ride to talk about changes taking place, annoying inmates, or even leadership calls.

Keinan and Malach-Pines [43] noted that limited research exists on the alleviation of correctional officer stress and made several suggestions to reduce correctional officers’ stress, such as officers seeking outside assistance/counseling, improving physical fitness, mentoring by a senior officer, and changing the work environment at the organizational level. The participants in this study, however, were reluctant to seek formal outside counseling measures or onsite EAP resources, due to the fear of stigma. Physical fitness is more acceptable alternative to them. As one responded said, “Exercise, I exercised, I’d go to the gym every day, after work. That was my release, except for weekends. My relief.” No participants described socializing in activities with large groups of people; however, it was noticed that most participants tended to engage only with small groups of friends or family. For all participants, the overriding theme was that most of these activities were solitary in nature or in small groups.

Conclusion

All study participants herein reported that they experienced work-related stress during their term as correctional officers in correctional facility; that their stress was originated from many sources (such as inmate manipulation, job responsibilities/hours, and leadership demands/changes, etc.); that they experienced role ambiguity and role conflict as they had to assume multiple roles as social worker, psychologist, etc. apart from security officer for which they were not trained; that they often withheld their inner feelings when confronted with a stressful situation (emotional dissonance) at work for fear of retaliation and retribution; that they used sick time whenever they needed a “mental health day;” that is, when experienced

work stress due to inmates, feeling over worked, and/or supervisors; that they were less tended either to see outside counseling assistance or onsite EAP resources due to fear of stigmatization; and that they, instead, adopted their preferred coping strategies such as physical fitness, vacationing, spending time with families and friends, recreation, outside employment, etc. One-half of the respondents continued dislike for corrections even after they left their employment as correctional officers, and 42 percent remained disconnected emotionally. While many of these findings are consistent with those in prior studies, the strength of this research lies in the responses of former correctional officers, who could express their views candidly without fear of retaliation or retribution, contrary to those in service and actively employed in the field. Hence their responses should be taken into account in order to increase the effectiveness of correctional officers while simultaneously relieving their stress levels. Unless their message is heeded and acted upon, correctional officers’ stress levels are likely to remain high and their retention is likely to low.

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