

Factors that Influence Detention Officers' Perceptions of the Jail Population

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Introduction

There is a stereotype associated with correctional officers that describes them as hostile and aggressive towards inmates. This stereotype comes from videos and articles that show the abuse perpetrated against the prison population by correctional officers. We hear of sexual misconduct allegations or the use of violent, physical force against inmates to restrain them. For example, recent articles reported that a correctional officer in Elayn Hunt Correctional Center was charged with simple battery (Padilla 2020), and a San Joaquin County correctional officer was charged with rape and sexual misconduct against an inmate (Thomas 2020). However, the ones we hear about are the outliers. These cases catch the media or the public's attention, and then the case grows. In contrast, most correctional officers are not violent. According to Simmons (2017), correctional officers are supposed to treat situations involving inmates in a professional manner, in a way that shows concern for those involved, including the inmates. The literature gives us insight about a variety of factors that could influence correctional officers' perceptions and attitudes. In this literature review, I will discuss these factors, which include occupational health, length of work experience within the prison system, bases of social power, their commitment to the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), and finally demographic factors. This study will add to the existing literature because it examines the relationship between correctional officers and inmates on a local level.

Literature Review

Occupational Health

The prison system is a violent place, and witnessing violence between inmates can affect a correctional officer's personal sense of security in a negative way (Isenhardt and Hostettler 2020). Research has shown that correctional employees who have experienced violence in the workplace have increased levels of exhaustion and disengagement and a decreased sense of security, which in turn leads to burnout (Isenhardt and Hostettler 2020). If one is constantly in a negative mental and physical state, due to exhaustion and job stress, then it is unlikely that they will do their job with the

same enthusiasm as someone who is healthy and happy at their job. One study found that work stress operated as a "mediating pathway" between correctional officers and their attitudes toward prisoners (Shannon and Page 2014: 630). Shannon and Page (2014) found that correctional officers who reported lower stress were more likely to have less harsh attitudes toward inmates. Thus, attitudes towards inmates were significantly associated with the conditions in the workplace (Shannon and Page 2014). The stress of watching violence occur within the workplace and even being a victim of workplace violence could cause stress to rise for anyone, not just a correctional officer.

In Clemente, Reig-Botella, and Coloma's (2015) study of occupational health, length of employment was a significant factor that affected correctional officers' perceptions of inmates. They found that correctional officers suffered greater deterioration in "psychosocial health" with an increased tenure (Clemente, Reig-Botella, and Coloma 2015: 258). While length of work experience impacts an individual's psychosocial health, it also influences how they may view and treat inmates.

Length of Work Experience

Working in an environment with a high level of violence for a long period of time can cause changes in how one perceives people and situations. The longer one works as a correctional officer, the more one learns and experiences. One study showed that those with beginner-level work experience scored lower on *burnout syndrome*, which the authors described as "emotional exhaustion, de-personalization/cynicism, and a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment," compared to those who had been a correctional officer for 20-plus years (Clemente et al. 2015: 251). If one has been a correctional officer for 20-plus years, then it is likely that their commitment to their job could positively impact how they treat inmates. However, in contrast, that length of time could negatively impact their perception of inmates if they had bad experiences. Clemente et al. (2015) also found how length of work experience could impact role ambiguity, where not knowing one's responsibilities could lead to stress, tension, as well as

dissatisfaction on the job (Sociological Dictionary n.d.). The authors found that those with beginner-level experience scored much higher in role ambiguity than did those with 6 to 15 and 15 plus-years of experience (Clemente et al. 2015: 251). As the literature shows, individuals with less work experience may experience more stress, which would in turn negatively impacts how correctional officers perceive and treat inmates.

Bases of Social Power

According to Fredrik and Smith (2015), there are five different bases of social power: reward, referent, legitimate, coercive, and expert. Reward power occurs when a correctional officer is able to offer something to an inmate to get something in return; referent power is based on a correctional officer's neutral, unbiased treatment of an inmate; legitimate power is based on the inmate's perception that the correctional officer has the ability to hand out punishments; coercive power is based on a correctional officer's ability to hand out punishment or threats to the inmate; finally, expert power is based on a correctional officer's "special knowledge" of an inmate's needs or wants (Fredrik and Smith 2015: 500). Fredrik and Smith's (2015) study showed that there were definite "power differentials" between correctional officers and inmates, specifically that there was a frequent need to exert authority over offenders in order to control behavior (Fredrik and Smith 2015: 511). The dominant bases of power were referent and legitimate, meaning that to ensure inmate compliance, the participants rated fair treatment and "legitimacy to be effective" higher than any other base of power (Fredrik and Smith 2015: 512). This shows that if other bases of power are used, such as coercive or expert, then the correctional officers likely do not view the inmate in a positive light, and if they use referent and legitimate power, then it is likely that they respect the inmates more. Because correctional officers are responsible for maintaining order and inmate behavior, it could be argued that the fair and respectful treatment of inmates is a key piece of their job (Fredrik and Smith 2015).

Commitment to the Bureau of Prisons (BOP)

The Federal Bureau of Prisons was created to provide humane care for federal inmates, to keep the field of corrections professional, and to ensure consistency among federal prisons (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2015). Research has examined whether the relationship between a correctional officer's commitment to their job and their perceptions of "inmate dangerousness, rapport with inmates, inmate reentry orientation, and respect towards inmates" exists on a federal level (Deffendol 2018: 3). In Deffendol's study of job commitment (2018), correctional officers with a low commitment level had lower scores with dangerousness, rapport, and respect towards inmates, compared to a correctional officer with a medium- to higher-level

commitment (Deffendol 2018). Supported by previous research, correctional officers who demonstrate rapport and respect with inmates had a higher level of commitment to the job than did those who did not (Deffendol 2018). The same study showed that the organizational commitment was impacted by organizational structure and job stress (Deffendol 2018). If the job causes a correctional officer high stress, then their commitment to the job decreases, which could negatively impact their perceptions of inmates. In terms of inmate perception, if a correctional officer is committed to their job and enjoys doing it, then their perceptions of the prison population would be more positive than if they did not care about their job as much.

Demographic Factors

Research conducted on correctional officer-inmate relationships have included demographic factors, including but not limited to job training, gender, educational level, salary, and age. With gender, research is limited and possibly biased, since the corrections field is a male-dominated career. One study found that because of higher perceptions of vulnerability, women had a lower sense of security (Isenhardt and Hostettler 2020). On the other hand, Rhineberger-Dunn, Mack, and Baker (2016) showed that gender was not a significant indicator of emotional exhaustion among corrections officers. Rhineberger et al. argued that gender may not have been a significant indicator of emotional exhaustion because correctional officers move around different units and do not stick with one case file for a long period of time, similar to probation officers. According to Isenhardt and Hostettler (2020), inmate age influences the level of violence and risk of victimization among correctional officers. With correctional officers, their age may allude to the same thing. For example, if the corrections officer is older, then he or she may be more prone to injury than if she or he were younger. In terms of inmate perception, however, if the corrections officer is older, then he or she may be more inclined to have a negative view of the prison population, because rehabilitation was not a big trend 40 to 50 years ago.

Salary and income are other demographic variables examined that were included in the research. Research shows that what an officer thought of their salary was important in predicting emotional exhaustion as well as job training and educational level (Rhineberger-Dunn et al. 2016: 220-21). In relation to education, the quality of a correctional officer's education was more important than the level of education when determining emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Rhineberger-Dunn et al. 2016).

As shown throughout the literature, there are a number of factors that influence corrections officers' perceptions of inmates, such as occupational health, length of work experience, bases of social power, their commitment to the BOP, and demographic factors. For my research, I interviewed corrections officers of the Troup County Jail to

further determine whether or not the factors cited in the literature impact jail inmates.

Methodology and Purpose

The purpose of my study was to determine what factors influence the interactions between jail inmates and detention officers. Most of the research concerning officer and inmate interaction is specific to correctional officers and prisoners; thus, the main goal of my study was to add to the limited literature on jail inmates and detention officers. Through in-person interviews and a demographic questionnaire, I was able to investigate this question¹. While my initial research strategy consisted of a comparative analysis between two local jails, to total 20 interviews, only one jail responded, even after multiple attempts. To gather my data, I conducted 10 in-person interviews with detention officers (following their prescribed COVID protocol). I used an interview guide and tape-recorded their responses. The tape recordings were for my own usage so that I could analyze the answers after the interviews. The recordings were deleted at the conclusion of the project. After my interviews were completed, I analyzed the data using a thematic analysis, where I coded for different themes that emerged from the data.

Results

Of the 10 officers interviewed, as shown in Table 1, 50% were male and 50% were female. Regarding the racial breakdown of detention officers, 50% were black and 40% were white. The majority made between \$30,001 and \$40,999, 50% had a bachelor's degree, and 80% had at least eleven years of experience. Due to my limited sample size, I made no statistical analyses concerning the impact of my demographics.

When asked about their perception of inmates, overall, the officers' perceptions were positive. The majority

(90%) of officers described inmates as "curious," "wanted to learn," "needed guidance," "repeat offenders," and "local." The officers were also critical of the correctional system, citing how an increase of programs, specifically educational programs, would reduce recidivism. They were also concerned about a shortage of officers, as well as increased job training.

Occupational health, length of work experience, and bases of social power were important variables in my analysis. Due to the volatility and dangerous nature of the job, the occupational health of detention officers is a concern. To maintain a safe working environment, respect was a key theme that emerged. Most officers (90%) said that in order to gain respect from inmates, they must respect inmates, too. Respect is instrumental, as it prevents violent interactions from occurring, which relates to the occupational health of detention officers.

Of the officers interviewed, 80% had worked in the field for over 10 years. This is important, as length of work experience impacts how officers view inmates and how they handle situations. While I cannot make statistical comparisons between groups, those with more experience were better equipped at handling confrontations if they arose. A mutual respect was key in avoiding or mitigating confrontations. The officers with less experience (less than 5 years) did not have much experience with handling inmate confrontations, at least on a personal level.

As shown in the literature, the type of power that an officer uses relates to their relationship with an inmate. Reward power was used by 40% of the officers interviewed. In these cases, the officers would reward good behavior; if the inmates respected the officers and each other, then the inmates would receive what they wanted. For example, one officer oversaw inmate release forms, and around Christmas, if some of those inmates were on good behavior and respected officers, then they were put on a list of inmates who may be

Table One: Demographic Variables

GENDER	SALARY	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	LENGTH OF WORK EXPERIENCE	RACE
MALE: 5 (50%)	<\$30,000: 0 (0%)	Some high school: 0 (0%)	0-5 years: 2 (20%)	White: 4 (40%)
FEMALE: 5 (50%)	\$30,001-\$40,999: 7 (70%)	High School Diploma: 1 (10%)	6-10 years: 0 (0%)	Black: 5 (50%)
	\$41,000-\$50,999: 2 (20%)	Some College: 2 (20%)	11-19 years: 5 (50%)	Hispanic: 0 (0%)
	\$51,000-\$60,999: 0 (0%)	Associate's Degree: 2 (20%)	20+ years: 3 (30%)	Asian: 0 (0%)
	>\$70,000: 0 (0%)	Bachelor's Degree: 5 (50%)		Multiracial: 0 (0%)
		Master's Degree: 0 (0%)		Other (not specified): 1 (10%)
		Doctorate: 0 (0%)		

released early. The most common type of power used was referent (cited by 90% of officers). To create an environment of respect, the officers explained that you must treat every inmate the same. If you do not, then inmates will not respect you and will become more hostile towards you, which puts your occupational health in danger.

Conclusion and Application

As highlighted in my results, respect was the main theme that emerged from my analysis. Of the ten detention officers interviewed, all of them used the phrase "you have to give respect to get respect," or something similar. By showing respect to inmates, my sample discussed how they decreased the likelihood of dangerous situations occurring, which is similar to the findings reported in the literature on occupational health. Mutual respect should be a dominant concern in jails throughout the country.

My study also shows that not all detention officers are as violent and aggressive as the media depicts them. Of the officers interviewed, only 20% discussed common violent interactions. The officers mentioned that being able to understand why the inmates are acting out is key to being able to stop violence before it happens. Mitigating violence, or avoiding it altogether, was a common goal among officers.

In terms of the importance of this study and its application to society, this research shows a need for the implementation of more jail programs. Educational programming and increased training for officers were key discussion points of the officers interviewed. Correctional reform is a key element in reducing recidivism rates. As cited by Ellison et al.'s meta-analysis (2017), educational programming can reduce recidivism, specifically because it leads to employment opportunities. If jails can implement programs like this, then offenders will be more likely to find and keep a stable job, keeping them out of jail.

In addition to educational programs, on-the-job training and the hiring of more correctional officers were also concerns. If these problems were addressed and the programs were implemented, then jails would become safer and healthier environments for the officers as well as for the inmates.

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ⁱ A copy of the survey used in the study can be requested by contacting the Faculty Mentor.