

OFFICER HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey

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Executive Summary

In just four decades, the size of the U.S. state prison population grew by more than 700 percent.¹ By 2008, the number of incarcerated individuals in the United States hit an all-time high, with 1 in 100 adults in either prison or jail² and fully 1 in every 31 American adults under some form of correctional jurisdiction (including incarceration, probation, and parole).³

Researchers have noted these patterns and trends with alarm. Yet while expansive studies have been conducted on correctional systems in the United States, most of this work begins and ends with a focus on the incarcerated. Much of the early literature either ignores correctional personnel altogether, or paints an overly simplistic picture. While interest in those who work inside American prisons has begun to grow, we still know surprisingly little about what happens to correctional personnel as a function of spending a career inside the prison system.

Like the number of people incarcerated, the ranks of people employed by the U.S. criminal justice system have increased substantially. As of 2003, almost 13 percent of all public employees (and a larger percentage in 15 states and the District of Columbia) worked in the criminal justice sector.⁴ Corrections alone accounts for more than 63 percent of state criminal justice employees, with police protection and judicial/legal employees accounting for the other 14 and 22 percent, respectively.⁵ In recent years, the correctional system has employed more people than General Motors, Ford, and Wal-Mart combined.⁶

On the front lines of the prison system, correctional officers, perhaps more than anyone else, directly affect the practice of incarceration in the way that they perform their jobs. Because of this, correctional programs and policies can have little chance of success without their overall health. This is particularly important when considering the mission of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and its goals of promoting public safety through a professional staff, as well as a constructive correctional and rehabilitation environment.

Understanding that correctional work can negatively impact the well-being of both inmates and correctional officers, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA), the CCPOA Benefit Trust Fund (BTF), and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) have joined forces with researchers at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) to address the issues of law enforcement health and wellness.

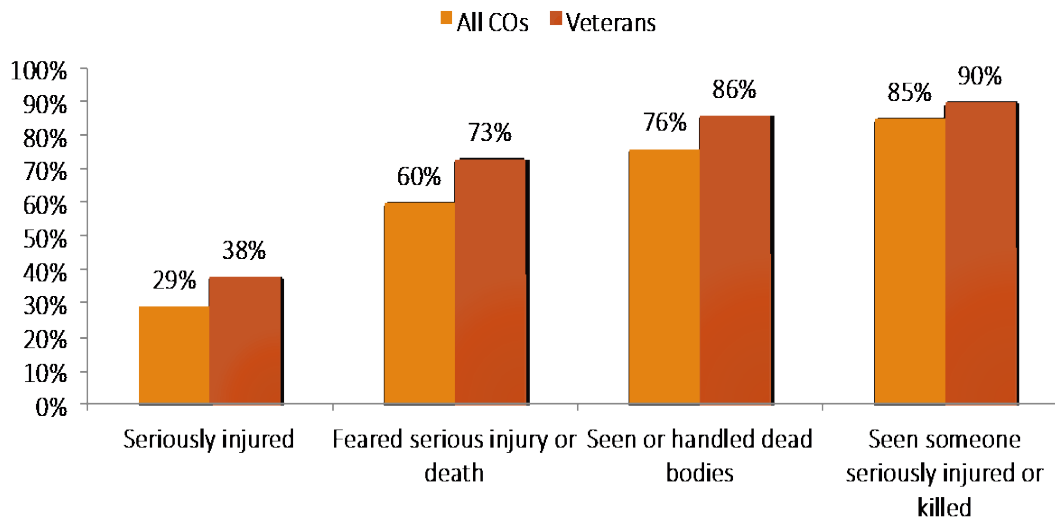
As a starting point, Dr. Amy E. Lerman and her team at UCB developed the California Correctional Officer Survey (CCOS). The CCOS is a large-scale effort to gather individual-level information on the thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of criminal justice personnel. The CCOS was first conducted in 2006, and the instrument was then expanded and replicated from March to May of 2017. The most recent survey includes a sample of 8,334 officers and other sworn staff, providing a vast cross-section of officers across all of California's correctional institutions and parole offices.

This report summarizes the results of the CCOS across a set of broad but related categories: mental and physical wellness; exposure to violence; attitudes towards rehabilitation and punishment; job training and management; work-life balance; and training and support. Highlights of the findings are described below.

Exposure to Violence focuses on the ways in which both the reality and perception of violence on the job can play an extremely detrimental role in the physical and mental health of correctional officers.

- *Prisons are violent workplaces.* More than half of officers report that violent incidents are a regular occurrence at the prison where they work. Moreover, 80% report that they have responded to at least one violent incident in the last six months, and 10% report being seriously injured while responding to these incidents. In total, 17% of correctional officers report they have been seriously injured on the job, 48% have feared they would be injured, 63% have seen or handled dead bodies at work, and 73% have seen someone seriously hurt or killed while on the job.

Officers are exposed to violence at rates roughly comparable to military vets.

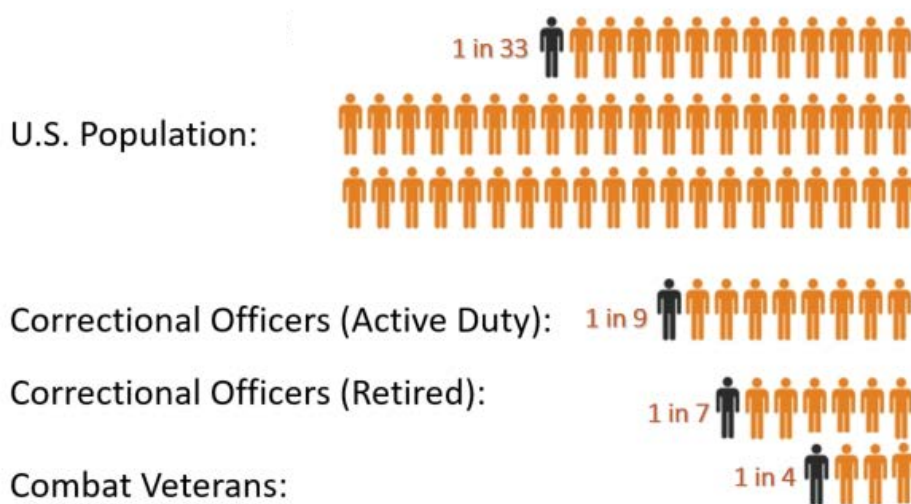


- *Officers do not feel they have what they need to stay safe.* About 1/3 of officers are dissatisfied with both the availability and the quality of safety equipment, and 70% of officers do not think there is enough staff where they work to provide for the safety and security of staff.
- *Most officers believe management does a good job providing guidelines on the use of force.* Two-thirds agree that management communicates when the use of non-lethal force is appropriate; 23% disagree. Confidence increases slightly when it comes to the use of lethal force: 77% of officers think management is clear on this, while 16% disagree.

Mental and physical wellness focuses on the health and wellbeing of sworn officers. The data clearly illustrate the toll that the correctional environment can take.

- *Correctional officers have a high incidence of serious stress-related illnesses compared to average Americans.* Forty-one percent of active officers have been told by a doctor that they have or are at risk of developing high blood pressure, 22% have been told the same about diabetes, and 16% are at risk for or have heart disease.
- *Work-related stress has significant health consequences.* Fully 50% of officers say they rarely feel safe at work, and officers who don't feel safe at work are more likely to report experiencing headaches, digestive issues, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease than other correctional officers (whose rates of stress-related illness are already higher than average).
- *Depression is a way of life for law enforcement personnel.* In fact, more than 1/3 of officers report that someone in their lives has told them they have become more anxious or depressed since they started working in corrections. Fully 28% report often or sometimes feeling down, depressed or hopeless, and 38% have little interest or pleasure in doing things.
- *1 in 3 have experienced at least one symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.* As a point of comparison, about 1 in 7 combat veterans are diagnosed with PTSD. Moreover, 40% of officers report that they have experienced an event so frightening, horrible or upsetting at work that they have had nightmares about it.
- *Ten percent of correctional officers have thought about killing themselves.* The rate of suicidal ideation is even higher for retired correctional officers (1 in 7). Of those who say they have thought about suicide, 31% report thinking about it often or sometimes in the past year. However, 73% haven't told anyone, meaning that many are suffering in silence.

Officers' reported prevalence of suicidal ideation is extremely high.



Work-Life Balance focuses on officers' lives outside the prison, with particular attention to the impact of corrections on individuals' personal lives.

- *Concern about workplace safety translates into extremely poor sleep habits.* Forty-one percent of officers report sometimes or often nodding off while driving. The proportion jumps to 47% for officers who do not feel safe at work. For many, fatigue is constant: 39% of all officers and 47% of those who feel unsafe at work report feeling exhausted even after sleeping.
- *There are serious downstream effects of corrections work.* The stress of working in corrections spills over to the families, friends, and loved ones of corrections personnel: 41% believe they would be a better parent, spouse or partner if they did not work in corrections; 53% report being harsher or less trusting towards friends and family since they took this job; and 65% of officers say someone in their lives has told them they judge others more harshly since beginning their career in corrections.
- *Officers fear they do not spend enough time with their family.* In fact, 66% of officers say that their work makes it hard to spend sufficient quality time with their family.
- *Officers want help managing their work-life balance.* Half of active officers say they would be interested in getting confidential links to therapists or counselors who specialize in working with the families of law enforcement; 43% say they are very interested in receiving training on how to better manage work-life balance.

Attitudes toward Rehabilitation and Punishment focuses on the attitudes of correctional officers towards the overarching goal of incarceration, as well as the types of programs offered in correctional institutions.

- *Correctional officers generally do not think they are making a positive difference.* Less than half agreed that they positively influence other people's lives through their work, and the same proportion think inmates are no better prepared to become law-abiding citizens when they leave prison than they were when they came in.
- *Officers believe that prisons have both rehabilitative and punitive functions.* While 49% of officers think rehabilitation should be a central goal of incarceration, 65% believe that the primary function of a prison is to keep the public safe and not to help inmates. However, 88% actually support some combination of rehabilitation and punishment.
- *There is an association between officers' work-related stress and their punitive attitudes.* Officers with at least one symptom of PTSD are less likely to think rehabilitation should be a central goal of incarceration and more likely to think that the job of a prison is purely maintaining the safety of the public.
- *Despite punitive leanings, a majority of officers agree that rehabilitation programs should be made available to those inmates who want them.* Specifically, 77% support vocational training; 86% support drug and alcohol treatment; and 82% of respondents support academic training up to and including GED preparation.

Job Training and Management focuses on the support of personnel, their relationships with and perception of management, and how these factors affect their overall satisfaction with the job.

- *Officers perceive their superiors to be largely competent, but also uncaring.* While 82% of officers perceive their supervisors as competent in their role, half do not think their supervisors care at all about their feelings.
- *Correctional officers do not feel recognized for their work.* About a third of officers say they have experienced a lack of recognition for their good work in the last six months.
- *Many express little loyalty to CDCR or to the profession.* Nearly half say they would move from this corrections department to another one if they didn't have to sacrifice their seniority, and 69% say they would immediately accept an offer from a job outside of corrections if it had similar salary or benefits.

Training and Support focuses on the needs of officers and their families, and the ways that CCPOA, the Benefit Trust, CDCR and the state can better support the health and well-being of criminal justice personnel.

- *Many officers report that they have either not been trained at all on health-related issues, or that training is of poor quality.* One-third report that training they have received related to stress management and dealing with trauma has been of very poor quality.
- *Many express concerns about using the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).* Only 18% of officers have used EAP, and one-fifth are concerned about the confidentiality of these services. About 15% are also concerned about negative consequences from management, 13% worry about judgment from coworkers, and 11% fear losing their job.
- *While the prevalence of mental health issues is high, so is the desire to learn.* More than half of officers want more training on stress management for law enforcement, as well as dealing with trauma and PTSD. This presents an incredible opportunity for California to lead the way in providing resources to a willing population in need.

Officers want access to a wide range of mental health training and resources.

Type of Resource	% Interested or Very Interested
Confidential links to counselors or therapists	49%
Online/digital resources related to health and well-being	58%
Anonymous hotline for law enforcement	43%
Stress management training	88%
Trauma/PTSD training	82%
Training in personal nutrition and exercise	86%

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- ¹ Pew Center on the States, *Prison Count 2010: State Population Declines for the First Time in 38 Years* (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, April 2010).
- ² Pew Center on the States, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America*. (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008).
- ³ Pew Center on the States, *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections* (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009).
- ⁴ These states include Nevada (16.9%), Florida (16.6%), Arizona (15.5), District of Columbia (15.5%), Delaware (15.1%), New Jersey (15.1%), New York (14.8%), Maryland (13.8%), Pennsylvania (13.7%), Louisiana (13.6%), Illinois (13.5%), Missouri (13.4%), Georgia (13.3%), California (13.2%), Massachusetts (13.2%), and Connecticut (12.8%).
- ⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Justice Expenditure and Employment Extracts”; bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=286.
- ⁶ Glen Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).