

VIOLENCE, MANAGEMENT & CORRECTIONAL OFFICER MENTAL HEALTH

IN A LARGE SURVEY OF OVER 8,000 LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL ACROSS CALIFORNIA, WE FOUND THAT EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE IN CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS IS STRONGLY ASSOCIATED WITH SYMPTOMS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD), SUICIDE RISK, AND REPORTED SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION, ALCOHOL ABUSE, ANXIETY, AND SLEEP DISORDER. IMPORTANTLY, WE ALSO FOUND A POTENTIALLY PROTECTIVE ROLE OF SUPERVISORY SUPPORT; SPECIFICALLY, GREATER SUPPORT APPEARS TO WEAKEN THE POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE ON CORRECTIONAL OFFICER MENTAL HEALTH.

The challenge

The state of California employs over 20,000 law enforcement personnel who work in or closely with California's state correctional facilities. Like many frontline and care workers, correctional staff perform emotionally taxing work under demanding working conditions. Corrections staff are routinely exposed to violent and traumatic events in the context of their work.

While there is growing consensus that exposure to violence while incarcerated can take a significant toll on the mental health of incarcerated individuals, we still know little about how exposure to violence while working in prison might produce similarly severe outcomes among correctional staff. The well-being of correctional staff is a particularly critical focus for policymakers seeking to recruit, support and retain correctional staff and better serve the incarcerated population.

What we did

In partnership with the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) and the CCPOA Benefit Trust, we set out to examine the effects of exposure to violence on correctional officer mental health.

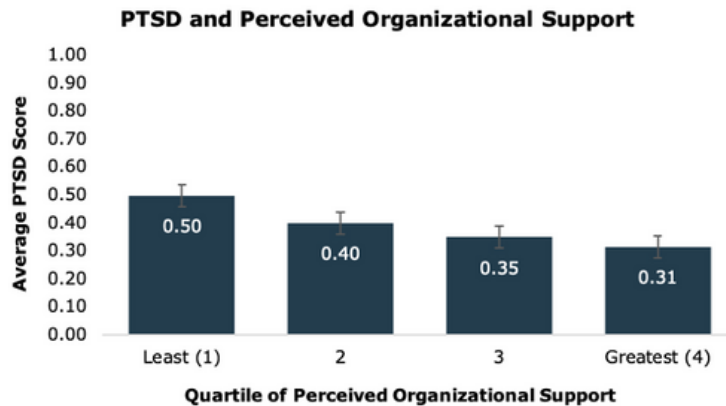
In addition, our goal was to assess whether negative mental health outcomes are an immutable feature of correctional work, or whether mental health risks instead might be mitigated through factors like increased stress management training or improved supervision and support.

We conducted an original, large-scale survey of correctional personnel from March 2017 to May 2017. The survey covered more than 8,400 law enforcement personnel across California, including roughly 4,300 officers who are currently working in the state's adult prison institutions. Our data were unique in two important ways. First, the survey asked a wide array of validated questions related to both workplace experiences and mental health. This provided us with a nuanced picture of officers' experiences. Second, respondents were distributed across 33 different prisons in a single state. This allowed us to leverage wide institutional variation in the likelihood of exposure to violence, and to assess the moderating effects of institutional factors on a range of outcomes.

Our findings

Our findings indicate that exposure to violence is strongly associated with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicide risk, and reported symptoms of depression, alcohol abuse, anxiety, and sleep disorder. These results remained consistent even once we controlled for a range of potential confounders, including both officer demographics and features of the prison environment.

Importantly, we also found that perceived occupational support can protect against psychological distress. Specifically, the data suggest that the more positively officers perceive supervision and management, as well as the quality and availability of stress management training, the less likely they are to report symptoms of PTSD and other mental health issues. In fact, these factors appear to moderate the relationship between exposure to workplace violence and negative mental health outcomes. In other words, the potential impact of exposure to violence may be lessened by greater perceived organizational support.



Next steps

Our findings suggest important policy implications. Just as the incarcerated population in America has skyrocketed, the number of employees in corrections has also grown. From 1982 to 2003, the number of people working in state corrections more than doubled. In fact, by the early 2000s, nearly 13 percent of all state and local public employees (and a larger percentage in 15 states) worked in criminal justice (Hughes, 2006). Our results suggest that, by largely ignoring the effects of prison context on officer mental health, policymakers may have underestimated the collective social-psychological damage that has accumulated from more than a half-century of mass incarceration in America.

Future research should evaluate the longer-term consequences of officers' mental health outcomes for prison staff and incarcerated individuals, as well as correctional operations. How officers do their job can make a crucial difference in determining the culture of the prison. In this sense, the overall health of the criminal justice system is tied to the well-being of its frontline workers. Correctional officers have the opportunity to promote public safety with professionalism and set the tone for a constructive rehabilitative environment. Or, they can react out of fear and stress with potentially lethal consequences. If officers are suffering from compromised mental health, it is likely to affect their ability to do their job safely, consistently, and well.

Additional resources

View media coverage:

- [Correctional officers at high risk for depression, PTSD, suicide, survey finds](#)
- [For corrections officers and cops, a new emphasis on mental health](#)

Related research on the correctional workforce:

- [The Pandemic in Prison: Implications for California Politics and Policymaking](#)
- [Feedback Effects and the Criminal Justice Bureaucracy: Officer Attitudes and the Future of Correctional Reform](#)

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