

# Working Within the Walls: The Effect of Care From Coworkers on Correctional Employees

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Most of the existing literature on correctional officer job satisfaction examines factors such as leadership, job environment, stress, and the enduring struggle between the keepers and the kept. This study examined the perceived effect of "care" from coworkers on the work of correctional officers. Care is defined as the expression of interest by one or others in another's life outside of the scope of work. Correctional officers in a southern prison system were surveyed regarding their perceptions of care from all levels of employees within the correctional system. The results indicate that correctional employee perceptions of care from coworkers is an emerging factor influencing how employees view their work and should be examined in greater detail.

Stress is a part of everyday life. All humans experience stressors, although the causes, intensity, and duration of these stressors vary widely. Reactions to stress and stressors can include weight loss or gain, family and relationship tension, depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, and a litany of other physical symptoms (Weiten & Lloyd, 2005). As Slate and Vogel (1997) note, job stress can be quite costly to an organization in terms of decreased productivity, employee turnover, health care and disability payments, sick leave, and absenteeism. Employers and organizations seek to reduce their employees' stress in the hopes of increasing productivity and job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1968). What happens when the very job itself is stressful? Can agencies successfully reduce job-related stress when duty positions must be manned twenty-four hours a day and days off are scarce? This is the everyday reality for many men and women who have careers with criminal justice agencies. Much of the focus on stress in the correctional environment has been on role problems/role ambiguity, job dangerousness, and the nature of the work itself (Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2002). Research has also pointed to the role that supervisors and administration play in stress among line personnel. Research on social factors, particularly the effect that care from coworkers has on the feelings of correctional

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staff, is far less common. The authors define care as the expression of interest by one or others in another's life outside of the scope of work.

Over the last two decades research has increased dramatically in regards to correctional officers' perceptions and attitudes about their jobs, the inmates they oversee, and their interactions with correctional administration. Correctional agencies are concerned about employee job satisfaction and its effect on job turnover and burnout (Slate, Vogel, & Johnson, 2002). Stress and job dissatisfaction have been linked to a variety of negative consequences, including poor job performance, mental and physical illness, and strain in personal relationships, as well as premature aging and death (Cornelius, 1994). Conversely, job satisfaction has been linked with positive results, which include greater job participation and decreased feelings of role conflict (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Grossi & Berg, 1991; Hogan, Lambert, Jenkins, & Wambold, 2006).

Many elements within the correctional environment contribute to job satisfaction. Lambert, Hogan, and Barton's review of the literature notes that "supervision and administration are important dimensions of the work environment accounting for correctional job satisfaction" (2002, p. 129). Many studies place emphasis on the role that social support such as coworker support in professional matters and supervisory support play in correctional officer perceptions of their workplace (Cullen & Link, 1985; Lambert et al., 2002).

Few studies, however, have looked at the role that "care" from coworkers—interest coworkers demonstrate in an officer's life outside of work—plays in employee feelings of their workplace. This interest might take the form of asking questions about family and activities outside of work and conveying general concern for overall employee well-being. In essence, what effect does emotional support from coworkers play in an individual's perceptions of stress and job satisfaction? One could argue that there is a difference between supporting an employee in work-related endeavors and actually caring or showing concern for them as individuals. The difference in employee perceptions of professional and personal support may provide correctional agencies with insight into how to increase job satisfaction and alleviate work stress. This paper examines the effect that care, or lack of care, from coworkers has on correctional employee perceptions of their workplace.

### **Literature Review**

Correctional officers are enmeshed in a unique work environment. Employment within a correctional institution involves working with hostile "clients," inherent job danger, and shift work, as well as mandatory or optional overtime (Glenn, 2001). Shift work can be especially challenging for people who have families or for single mothers with small children. Rotating shifts often affect entire families. In areas that have a high concentration of prisons, entire

communities can be affected. Work schedules may be in a state of flux, particularly for officers with little or no seniority, which puts childcare schedules in the same uncertain state. Shift work can have negative effects on the body because of sleep deprivation. Scott lists six symptoms of “shift lag”: impaired performance, irritability, gastrointestinal dysfunction, depression and apathy, sleepiness/sleeping at work, and sleep disruption during daytime sleep (1994, p. 221). Scott concludes that women are particularly susceptible to health problems due to shift work, including cardiovascular morbidity and obstetric problems such as spontaneous abortion, babies with low birth weight, and preterm births. Another compelling work influence is the subculture that exists among correctional officers.

A large body of research exists on the subculture of the police officer and its effect on supervisors, police officers, and the public. Research has also been conducted to indicate whether there is a similar subculture among “keepers.” Kaufman (1988) concludes that correctional officers hold a similar set of beliefs that makes them distinct and unique from treatment staff and prison administrators. Kaufman identifies nine norms that constitute the correctional officer code: (1) Always go to the aid of an officer in distress, (2) Don’t “lug” drugs (bring them into the institution for an inmate to use), (3) Don’t rat on another officer, (4) Never make a fellow officer look bad in front of the inmates, (5) Always support an officer in a dispute with an inmate, (6) Always support officer sanctions against inmates, (7) Don’t be a “white hat” or a “goody-two-shoes,” (8) Maintain officer solidarity versus all outside groups, and (9) Show positive concern for fellow officers (1988, p. 86).

Correctional officer subcultures influence the socialization of correctional trainees. The recruits observe and imitate senior officers. Marquart and Crouch (1990) assert that the subculture influences a new officer in the following areas:

1. Perception of inmates—Traditionally, inmates are viewed as the “enemy” or as “non-human.” The correctional officer’s main job is to ensure security and enforce rules and regulations. While officers have different styles of dealing with offenders, most officers strongly dislike inmates as a whole and may often look for opportunities to “screw over” an inmate. Most new officers learn these attitudes from other correctional officers. Inmates, regardless of their actions, are not to be trusted.
2. Anticipation of trouble—Trouble can come from any inmate at any time, but, more often than not, there are signs that problems are developing. Officers might notice a change in noise in the cellblock area, whether it be extremely quiet when normally loud or very loud when usually quiet. Refusal or apprehension of an offender when asked to be searched could also be a sign of trouble. The senior

officer is important in conveying this type of information to new officers as they understand the workings of the institution and know what is usual or unusual for that specific prison. Failure to obtain this skill would potentially exclude an officer from inclusion in the subculture.

3. Management of inmates—As noted above, officers handle inmates differently. Women may use more psychological pressure or techniques to gain compliance where as men might use physical force. The Field Training Officer (FTO) may offer strategies for dealing with offenders. Offenders are not carbon copies, and senior officers often help new officers understand how to deal with mental health inmates as well as inmates of other races. The subculture as a whole would encourage as little interaction as possible.

The correctional officer subculture has both positive and negative effects. The subculture can help other correctional officers find support in a job and environment that is full of stress and pressure. Few people understand the world of the correctional officer like other correctional officers do, which has led some correctional agencies to develop correctional officer-led trauma support teams to assist officers in need. Most of the literature on peer support programs in criminal justice agencies focuses on programs designed to help police officers cope with the stress of the job. Most of this research, however, involves peer assistance after traumatic stress or critical incidents (Stephens & Long, 2000). Correctional agencies use peer support teams for the same purposes (Cheeseman, 2006). While these teams or peer support programs are important, there may also be a need for officers to feel concern from other officers even when situations appear ordinary or mundane. Unfortunately, the literature on correctional officers notes that the correctional officer subculture also promotes negative behavior. This subculture may encourage officers to act in ways that violate their personal beliefs, which may cause inner conflict and strife (Kaufmann, 1988). Coworkers have a distinct effect on one's perception of the workplace and may affect perceptions of stress at work or at home.

The literature on correctional officer stress has examined "social support" and its effect on job satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2002). Three main aspects of social support seem to be particularly pertinent to the correctional officer. This first source of social support comes from the supervisory and management staff.

Grossi, Keil, and Vito (1996) found that those systems operating within the work environment have a significant effect on correctional officer stress. Whitehead and Lindquist (1986) found that administrators had a great effect on job stress and burnout among correctional officers, and their lack of support only perpetuated these problems. Some researchers conclude that the organization is vital in assisting with alleviating stressors:

The most useful point of intervention is the job and work setting . . . Obviously, the problem cannot be completely eliminated until individuals and the society in which they live are changed, but much can be done before this occurs simply by changing the structure of roles, power, and norms in human service organizations (Cherniss, 1980, p. 158).

Brodsky (1982, p. 81) includes a list of conditions that gave rise to long-term correctional employee stress, including three organizational factors:

1. pressure designed to force them to resign or transfer,
2. no backing when attacked or goaded by inmates,
3. no support in dealing with public problems with visitors, protestors, press.

Triplett, Mullings, and Scarborough (1996) found that a majority of the stressors correctional officers identify are those over which the correctional officer has little or no control. Organizational responses to these stressors might benefit officers' health, efficiency, and job satisfaction. Cheek and Miller (1983) found officers ranked the administrative items in their survey as most stressful. Cornelius (1994, p. 61) points out three basic steps supervisors can take to assist in correctional officers' stress reduction.

1. controlling their own stress,
2. recognizing and helping stressed-out workers cope with their stress, and
3. improving physical conditions as well as the mental outlook of workers.

The next type of social support Shamir and Drory (1982) identify is that of family and community support. Researchers conclude that the community offers very little support to correctional officers, which is an additional source of stress for the officer (Cullen & Link, 1985; Shamir & Drory, 1982; Long, Shouksmith, Voges, & Roche, 1986). The evidence in relationship to family support has not shown conclusively that it reduces stress (Shamir & Drory, 1982; Grossi & Berg, 1991; Triplett et al., 1996).

The literature does suggest, however, that correctional officers experience family-related problems due to stress. Cheek and Miller (1983) note that although correctional officers did not report that they were experiencing problems at home or divorce, the rate of divorce for correctional personnel was two times that of other blue-collar workers. Cheek and Miller (1983) also found that correctional officers frequently reported letting out tensions in the wrong places (i.e. at home), tightening of discipline at home, and the desire to spend less time at home on their days off (Cheek & Miller, 1983). Black (1982) found that correctional officers experiencing stress damage their family relationships by displacing their frustration onto their spouses and children. Finn (1998) also suggests that shift work, long hours, and overtime make it difficult for officers to attend important family functions, further weakening their ties to a family support system.

The last type of social support Shamir and Drory (1982) identify is peer support, or support from fellow officers. Peer support is an important variable in occupational stress and tends to be even more important in jobs where there is danger (Shamir & Drory, 1982). Some research indicates that favorable relations with fellow officers diminish feelings of alienation and cynicism (Poole & Regoli, 1981).

Much of the literature on coworker support is ambiguous or shows a negative effect on job satisfaction. Jurik and Halemba (1984) found that those officers who reported positive attitudes toward their coworkers had negative levels of job satisfaction. Lombardo notes in his research of New York officers an inclination for "officers not to derive satisfaction from associations with members of their work group" (1981, p. 148). Lombardo also found that oftentimes correctional officers worked against one another instead of offering assistance. Finn (1998) found that 20% of officers surveyed viewed "other staff" as their highest cause of stress. Grossi and Berg (1991) point out that in obtaining peer support, officers may compromise their personal integrity, values, or sense of right and wrong. To enhance their acceptance, females and ethnic minority officers may remain silent but discontent. This could explain why high levels of job dissatisfaction are often paired with high levels of peer support (Grossi & Berg, 1991).

Clearly, social support systems play a part in how correctional officers perceive their work environments. Support from coworkers influences how one views his or her job and life circumstances. This paper examines the concept of care or support that involves factors outside of work-related support and concerns and specifically examines the role that coworker care has on correctional officer job satisfaction, work stress, and life stress.

## **Methods**

The researchers gathered data for the present paper through surveys they administered to correctional staff attending regional inservice training for a southern prison system. This region has 13 correctional institutions that oversee offenders from all custody designations. These prison units include the facility that houses death row offenders as well as a high-security (Supermax) facility. Researchers administered the survey seven times to various inservice training groups over three months. After that time, researchers coded and analyzed the surveys.

This study used a purposive sample. The main drawback to this sample is that it excluded individuals who had fewer than eight months of service as these individuals were not required to attend inservice training. The only qualification in the sample selection was that the employee has direct contact with inmates. No consideration was made to stratify for race or gender or any other demographic characteristic.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

	Number	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Age Range (18–80)</b>			<b>40.1</b>	<b>16.67</b>
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
Black	104	20.8		
Hispanic	30	6.0		
White	335	66.9		
Other	25	5.0		
No response	7	1.4		
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	330	65.9		
Female	168	33.5		
No response	3	0.6		
<b>Current Shift</b>				
First	224	47.7		
Second	151	30.1		
Third	48	9.6		
8–5	2	0.4		
Other	76	15.2		
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Married	250	49.9		
Divorced	77	15.4		
Separated	14	2.8		
Single	150	29.9		
Widowed	5	0.8		
No response	5	1.2		
<b>Education Level</b>				
GED	157	31.3		
High School	51	10.2		
Some College	227	45.3		
College Degree	50	10.0		
Grad School	8	1.6		
No response	8	1.6		
<b>Years of Service (Range 0.08–31.4)</b>			<b>7.74</b>	<b>8.87</b>

N = 501

The sample comprised 501 correctional employees. A total of 630 surveys were distributed, with a response rate of 79.4%. Table 1 presents the sample demographic characteristics. The sample is representative of the larger population of correctional officers the correctional agency employs. The racial breakdown for the agency employees is 51.9% Caucasian, 28.2% African-American, 18.8% Hispanic, and 1.1% Other (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2006). The gender breakdown of “security” employees within the agency

is 63.5% male and 36.5% female. The average age of security employees is 39.0 years. Average years of service for security employees is 7.0 years (TDCJ, 2005).

Researchers measured perceptions of concern from various levels within the agency by means of a variable that was created from a question that asked respondents to circle all those they felt cared about them as individuals, which were agency, current prison administration, immediate supervisors, and coworkers. Of the 501 respondents, 150 noted that they felt that no one cared about them as an individual. A dichotomous variable was then created in which those who believed coworkers did not care about them were coded "0" and respondents who noted that their coworkers cared about them were coded as "1."

## Results

The researchers used bivariate correlations to examine relationships between the control variables and care from coworkers. They found significant relationships when they correlated the "care" variable with other demographic variables and scales. Tables 2a and 2b provide an overview of the Pearson Correlation Coefficients.

Examination of the Pearson correlations between perceptions of care from coworkers and control variables indicate significant relationships exist among three variables: life stress, job satisfaction, and race (White). Correctional employees who reported they perceived their coworkers cared about them had decreased levels of life stress. Life stress was measured by means of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CESD), which has been previously used in stress research (Cullen & Link, 1985). Those who reported coworker care also reported having higher levels of job satisfaction. White correctional employees were significantly more likely to report that they perceived care from coworkers than were minority correctional employees.

To assess the relative effect of care from coworkers, the researchers used multiple linear regression models to predict what effect the independent variable "care from coworkers" had on three dependent variables: life stress, work stress, and job satisfaction in comparison with other independent variables. They selected these variables due to their importance in much of the literature on correctional officers. The results of the multiple regression models appear in Table 3.

Four variables are significant predictors of job satisfaction: role conflict, age, work stress, and job danger. The less likely one was to have feelings of job danger the more likely they were to be satisfied at work ( $p = .05$ ). Work stress and age were the most significant predictors of job satisfaction ( $p = .000$ ). As work stress increases, job satisfaction decreases. As the correctional employee's age increases, his or her job satisfaction also increases. The final significant predictor of job satisfaction is role conflict. Employees who reported having more role conflict were significantly more likely to have



decreased feelings of job satisfaction. Perception of care from coworkers had no significance in predicting overall job satisfaction.

Table 2a. *Pearson Correlations of Coworker Care and Control Variables of Coworker Care, Life Stress, Work Stress, Role Conflict, and Job Danger*

	Coworker Care	Life Stress	Work Stress	Role Conflict	Job Danger
Coworker Care	1.00				
Life Stress	-.139**	1.00			
Work Stress	-.060	.188**	1.00		
Role Conflict	-.058	.129**	.346**	1.00	
Job Danger	.001	-.023	.300**	.110*	1.00
Job Satisfaction	.123**	-.116**	-.456**	-.295**	-.216**
Marital Status	.067	-.104*	-.036	-.009	.031
Gender	-.087	.173**	.119**	-.101*	-.011
Race	.146**	-.075	.034	.112	.001
Education	-.022	-.036	-.034	.024	-.001

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

Table 2b. *Pearson Correlations of Coworker Care and Control Variables of Job Satisfaction, Marital Status, Gender, Race, and Education*

	Job Satisfaction	Marital Status	Gender	Race	Education
Coworker Care					
Life Stress					
Work Stress					
Role Conflict					
Job Danger					
Job Satisfaction	1.00				
Marital Status	.060	1.00			
Gender	-.010	-.207	1.00		
Race	.077	.075	-.127	1.00	
Education	.043	-.006	-.054	-.034	1.00

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

Six variables were of significance when predicting work stress: life stress, job satisfaction, job dangerousness, role conflict, gender, and education level. Care from coworkers had no significant predictive ability in relation to work stress. The final multiple

linear regression equation was conducted to find a best fit model for predicting life stress. Five variables were significant: role conflict, work stress, gender (female), marital status (not married), and coworker care. Increased role conflict caused increased life stress ( $p = .048$ ). Work stress had significant predictive power ( $p = .005$ ) and gender—being female—was also a significant predictor of life stress. Correctional officers who reported being unmarried also had higher feelings of life stress ( $p = .021$ ). Care from coworkers was also significant as people who reported having care from coworkers were less likely to report feelings of life stress ( $p = .007$ ). The final section of this paper discusses the implications of these findings as well as policy suggestions.

Table 3. *Standardized Beta Coefficients for Multiple Linear Regression Equations*

Independent Variables	Model 1 Job Satisfaction	Model 2 Work Stress	Model 3 Life Stress
Role Conflict	-.135**	.203**	.140**
Job Dangerousness	-.091*	.230**	-.118*
Work Stress	-.361**	XXX	.336**
Life Stress	-.078	.237**	XXX
Job Satisfaction	XXX	-.296**	-.099
Age	.212**	.017	-.059
Education	.059	.087*	-.036
Race	.068	.078	-.067
Gender	.041	.094*	.162**
Marital Status	-.012	.016	-.104
Care from Coworkers	.071	.032	-.119**
R <sup>2</sup>	.289	.392	.240
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.282	.383	.229
F value for equation	40.651	42.807	20.944

\* $p < .05$       \*\* $p < .01$

### Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this analysis point to the importance of care from coworkers to correctional employees. Employees who reported that their coworkers cared about them were also significantly more likely to have decreased feelings of life stress and higher levels of job satisfaction. Care from coworkers was not a significant predictor of work stress, although decreased job satisfaction was statistically significant in predicting work stress. One could

argue that officers see other factors such as role conflict and job danger as more pressing causes of stress at work as opposed to whether a coworker asks them how they are doing. These variables were both significant predictors of work stress. Interestingly, correctional employees who reported higher feelings of coworker care also reported having less life stress. This could in fact be due to officers “sharing” problems with those around them. Officers and supervisors who exchange information about family members and personal situations may feel concern or empathy for one another, which could lead to decreased feelings of life stress. Life stress was a significant predictor of work stress. If care from coworkers reduced life stress, it might also indirectly reduce work stress.

Work encompasses a large portion of life. In the field of corrections, officers often face long hours. In some instances, the officers who work together may see one another more often than their own families. Not surprisingly, officers may view their coworkers as a pseudo-family. These “family” members may function like any other family, with dysfunction and occasional discord. While not all “family” members get along, in many instances there is still a sense of togetherness and teamwork. Unity is often found in the small occurrences that make people believe others care for them such as shift “spreads”—when correctional employees bring food to the unit and spend their breaks eating together and enjoying outside food versus food cooked by the offenders. These times are good for team building and camaraderie (Cheeseman, 2006). They create the pseudo-family atmosphere that makes supervisors and fellow employees seem less like coworkers and more like friends. Realistically, not all officers will become “friends,” but activities that foster a sense of being part of a team would be rewarding to both line employees and correctional administrators.

It could be perceived as a challenge to make other officers “care.” Employees cannot be made to care or feel pressured to care as doing so could potentially cause stress for these officers. Administrators can, however, create an environment where workers are encouraged and invited to show concern for one another. This attitude, if instilled among officers and supervisors, could increase job satisfaction and decrease work stress.

When officers indicate that they believe their coworkers do not care about them, they may experience feelings of bitterness and burnout as demonstrated by the comment of one survey respondent: “TDCJ is a very none [sic] caring agency. It is all about the offenders. Morale is terrible, that’s why people don’t want to come to work.” One officer indicated feeling fear at the hands of coworkers as indicated by the following comment: “I spent my first 19 months as a CO and when in gray was more afraid of my coworkers than the inmates.” Another employee noted, “In all of my life I have never met such deceitful, evil people including officers as well as the inmates!” Conversely, one correctional employee expressed how working with officers who cared about one another

affected that employee's life positively: "I love my unit and shift. Our 2 Lt.'s and 3 Sgt.'s are helpful clear-minded and 4 [sic] their CO's. [We're] a true family." Interestingly, correctional employees seemed more likely to describe lack of concern from their coworkers than share experiences of positive concern. The above observations demonstrate the importance of care or lack of care from coworkers.

Clearly, there is a need for more concern at every level in correctional agencies. The literature points to the conflict between management and line staff (Kaufman, 1988). Administrators who show more concern for employees' lives might serve as models for other officers to emulate. Training for new officers, whether male or female, might need to better address workplace stress as younger officers report higher levels of work stress than those with more years of service. While programs such as the FTO/Mentoring program are in place, they are only as good as the mentors selected. Careful selection and placement of mentors with newer or younger officers could greatly benefit the new officer who could easily get swallowed up by the pitfalls of prison employment. This mentor relationship might also help to foster "care" among employees. Agencies might benefit from examining the effectiveness of mentoring.

This study is exploratory in nature, and further research on the elements involved in "care" for employees would benefit not only correctional agencies but other criminal justice agencies. Future studies should also assess the differences between how males and females interact in the correctional environment. Path modeling might also be a way that can better unravel how stressors affect correctional officers. This research was conducted in a southern prison system, and a study that incorporates other regions of the United States is important. Additionally, the use of a purposive sample left out correctional officers with fewer than eight months of service as these individuals were not required to attend inservice training. New employees may provide information that could be critical in retaining employees. Although the study has limitations, the empirical findings have potential policy implications.

Corrections is a people business that often requires intense and frequent interactions with offenders. The synergistic effects of stressors associated with working in corrections are exhibited in a variety of physical and mental symptoms. Correctional executives and immediate supervisors who ignore these effects inevitably face lower levels of employee morale and higher levels of employee absenteeism, poor health, and turnover. But one could also argue that the "new" super sensitive and litigious workplace has actually taken away from a supervisor's or officer's ability to show care or concern for another coworker. Work environments have become constricted, and fear of lawsuits places limitations on interpersonal communication that indicates concern. Employees may attempt to avoid accusations of sexual harassment and misuse of authority. A statement such as "You look

nice today” could be viewed or considered to be sexual harassment in an age when correctional agencies have a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment.

From a management perspective, work environments that nurture and facilitate effective interpersonal communication among employees and managers are more effective (Swanson, Territo, & Taylor, 2005). Preservice and inservice training could facilitate how and what types of conversations are professional but are still able to convey messages of concern. Management should not overlook the effects of demonstrations of care from other employees. Correctional officers are the backbone of our correctional institutions. Helping these officers succeed will generate success for supervisors as well as correctional agencies.

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