

County Jails: Correctional Officer Stress

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Abstract

This research paper discusses facts concerning the occupational stressors involving being a correctional officer. There has been a lot of past research dedicated to studying the behaviors and attitudes of correctional officers in regards to stress. Correctional officers can experience outcomes of the job that can be both positive and negative. The correctional officers work environment affects the officer in many different ways. Excessive stress causes both physical and mental problems. The researcher had been studying the impact of stress on correctional officers within an organizational structure. Some county jails in Florida were surveyed to determine effects it has on correctional officers. During these low economic times, understaffing is the most stress factor correctional officers were experiencing.

Introduction (Lit Review)

One of today's most challenging occupations is being a correctional officer. A correctional officer faces many work related and environmental factors that contribute to stress. Several stress factors that are found within a corrections environment are not typically found in other occupational environments. These issues may include shift work, threats of inmate violence, assaults, understaffing, having a positive corrections public image and working excessive overtime.

Correctional officer stress is a very serious concern. Earlier research and studies were geared towards identifying significant job-related stressors from the correctional officer's perspective. They looked at job satisfaction and the involvement organizations have in controlling these issues. Many agencies today have diverted resources to promote programs to aid the correctional officer and their families. Today, corrections as a whole is making strides to develop healthy workplaces. It is most important to protect our most valuable asset, our correctional officers. It is the responsibility of each agency to ensure the programs they implement to address correctional officer stress be tailored to specific and unique characteristics of their organization (Delprino).

Stress causes significant problems for correctional officers. The effects of ignoring excessive stress in a county jail or prison institution can be damaging on that particular social structure. The stressors correctional officers experience can compromise institutional safety, create stress for peers, and cost agencies money (Criminal Justice Office, 2011).

Daily contact and supervision of inmates has also been identified as a stressor for correctional officers. Correctional officers must enforce rules and regulations consistently. They must treat inmates fairly and be in compliance with federal, state, and

local laws governing the care, custody, and control of the inmates they supervise. They must have appropriate inter-personal communication skills to reduce conflict and maintain institutional control at all times (Black, 2001).

There has been a lot of research dedicated to studying the behaviors and attitudes of correctional officers. Correctional officers are responsible for all the numerous functions tasked within a correctional institution. Correctional officers can experience outcomes of the job that can be both positive and negative. The correctional officer's work environment affects them in many different ways. Correctional officers can experience both physical and mental problems. A large part of literature has been in studying the impact of the organizational structure and the effect on correctional officer stress. The studies have focused on issues including centralization, integration, instrumental communication, and organizational justice (Lambert, Hogan, and Allen, 2006). Correctional officers have many duties they must complete within a timely manner. Role stress has been researched and found to have a direct impact on how correctional officers perform these duties accurately. Role stress is the constant struggle correctional officer's face while they engage in their custodial duties such as preventing escapes, preventing inmate violence and implementing rehabilitation development.

The correlates of role stress among correctional officers were explored over the years as it relates to specific problems at work. Role stress was found to be harmful to correctional officers. Past research found that lower job satisfaction, greater job stress, lower organizational commitment, and intention to quit were all linked to role stress. Past research also looked at the effects of stress as it relates to personal characteristics like gender, age, tenure, education level, race, supervisory status, and position. Studies indicated whether the work environment had an impact on correctional officers. Studies also revealed data in decision making, supervision, job performance, and instrumental communication. This data was collected from a Midwestern Prison. It was found, the personal characteristics of a position and job tenure had a connection to role stress. Non-custody staff with a higher tenure had greater role stress than those of custody staff with lower tenures. With regard to the work environment, decision making, supervision, integration, and instrumental communication had a negative relationship with role stress, whereas job performance feedback didn't (Lambert, Hogan, and Tucker, 2009).

Shift work and working excessive overtime can create stress within a correctional officer's family because it may prevent them from attending important family functions. Correctional officers that experience excessive stress may damage their relationships with their families by displacing their frustrations onto their spouses and children. One negative characteristic which can be displayed by a correctional officer that is experiencing excessive stress is to order their family members around as they command inmates in their work environments. Contributing factors that contribute to correctional officer stress cannot be eliminated but the potential of negative impact can be reduced with the appropriate organizational intervention (Delprino). Agencies must be proactive in addressing stress to eliminate or reduce high turnover ratios.

A high turnover rate can be associated with organizations not addressing stress related incidents with their institutions. This creates persistent staffing problems for correctional administrators. The research that was completed addressed two main

stressors of the work environment, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. These two stressors of the working environment are often thought to be related to turnover issues within institutions. The study conducted referred to two types of organizational commitment: commitment to the organization and commitment to the specific institution. The data for the study came from a 1991 Prison Social Climate Survey. It hypothesized that both aspects of commitment to the organization would have a greater impact on turnover than institutional commitment. The climate survey analyzed and concluded that higher levels of organizational commitment are associated with lower levels of turnover rates. The effects of the measures of organizational commitment are also greater than job satisfaction. Job satisfaction measured to be non-significant. Also, both measures of organizational commitment had about an equal influence on turnover (Camp, 1994).

In an era where the economy is affected by rising costs, agencies have shrinking budgets, and personnel shortages, it is increasingly important correctional institutions provide an environment that supports work stability. It is clear, stress causes job burnout and the ripple effect is felt by the administrators and subordinates alike. Research studies have concluded job burnout has a direct negative impact on the organization as a whole. Some of the dimensions of job burnout include depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a feeling of a lack of accomplishment at work (Griffin, Hogan, Lambert, Tucker-Gail, and Baker, 2010).

Correctional officers rarely gain positive recognition from the public for doing something right. This is the complete opposite for police officers, and fire fighters who remain in the public eye repetitively. Correctional officers defuse tensions among societies most violent and dangerous outcasts. It is stressful for correctional officers to do this intervention on a routine basis.

Correctional officers must be able to adapt to their fluxion environments. Sometimes when correctional officers make the news, usually they are accused of a wrongdoing towards an inmate, a victim of an assault, or are being investigated for misconduct (Crary, 2005).

Correctional institutions have policies in place to handle emergency situations within their environments. These critical incidents have contributed as stressors for correctional officers. Many agencies have regulations governing assistance to correctional officers to deal with post-traumatic stress inherited with a critical incident. In most cases, there is on scene assistance, support from supervisors, leave provided, a debriefing, and protection from other outside stressors like media exposure. One example of a referral service for correctional officers and their families is the Employee Assistance Program. This service promotes confidentiality and has a goal to return the correctional officer to duty once they aid them on how to cope with life stresses (Stress Management Techniques,2006).

Maintaining a successful stress program is not an easy task. Careful considerations should be made by department heads in order to make their program successful. Characteristics of the program should include monitoring the program's effectiveness to save the agency money, get the participation from all staff, family members, maintain confidentiality, and appointing a charge person who can handle assisting others whom are experiencing stress issues (The Counseling Team International,2005).

Consequences of stress can make a correctional officer display feelings of helplessness, alienation, powerlessness, and estrangement. An organization can experience turnover, reduced job productivity, high rates of absenteeism and high health-care costs. Managers must implement programs to reduce stress. They must also develop techniques to recruit and retain individuals who have the resources to handle the stress of institutional life (The Counseling Team International,2005).

The purpose of this research was to define stressors within specific county jails. My research produced the results of current data collected from specific institutions. The data was collected from surveys that questioned certified correctional officers about stressors they experienced in their workplaces. The data revealed what unique stress factors, if any, still existed. A rating of stress factors collected was identified from least to greatest. Also, a list of recommendations was composed to help assist agencies in reducing stress within their social environments.

Agencies in our criminal justice system have a responsibility to reduce stress in their environments. Ultimately, positive intervention will produce all the positive rewards for correctional officers, their families, and the communities correctional officers proudly serve.

It is imperative that the support systems for correctional officers are implemented by agencies to assist them not only during critical incidents but to aide correctional officer's when dealing with stressors that are created by either internal or external factors. In order to collect current data from correctional officers concerning stress indicators they are experiencing it was necessary to survey these institutions to gather the information and document it appropriately. Also, it was imperative for the researcher to describe any findings, if still any existed, concerning organizational stress and their effects on the correctional officer.

Methods

The purpose of this research process was to identify stressors that exist within specific county jails located in Florida, identify if correctional officers managed stress and the techniques they used to manage their stressors. The data collected reflected correctional officer's experiences and focused on their behaviors about stress. A survey was used to collect current data within Florida's county jails. A random selection of jails was surveyed by the researcher. The county jails that participated in the survey were Hillsborough, Manatee, Osceola, Pasco, Sarasota, Seminole and Volusia. The population of correctional officers surveyed in those county jails averaged two hundred and fifty-four correctional officers. The population of correctional officers at the Volusia County Branch jail where I am employed is two hundred sixty-three officers. The current data collected from correctional officers identified specific stress indicators they are experiencing and how they managed stress in and out of their working environments, specifically county jails.

The questions from the survey analyzed a range of correctional officers with multiple job experiences as it related to job tenure. I inquired whether the correctional officers

practiced stress management techniques when they experienced stress and the data collected from the survey identified the techniques they used. The survey also allowed correctional officers to choose what stress factors had the least effect on them, the most effect on them, whether stress factors they experienced effected the pride they had in their work, stress factors they would like to see improved on the job, and stress indicators they would like to see improve in their individual lives. The survey also determined whether correctional officers ever participated in a professional stress management structure to reduce or manage their stressors.

I developed a questionnaire called the "Correctional Officer Stress Survey". The survey was then created online using a survey program. The survey contained single response questions. The survey analysis format graphed the responses from the correctional officer's stress survey using the frequencies method. This method of survey analysis reported how many correctional officers responded a certain way to each question in the survey. I made multiple phone calls to different county jails within Florida to implement the survey process. I spoke directly to county jail administrators, introduced myself and defined the purpose of my research, as it related to their organizational structures. I described the correctional officer stress survey, the reasons for collecting this data, and how the data related to the correctional officers in our county jails. I sent a request, by email, to those county jail administrators requesting they review the survey as we discussed. Those county jail administrators were asked to aide me in my research by allowing their correctional officers to have the authorization to answer the correctional officer stress survey while they were on duty. Then, I sent an email to those county jail administrators who agreed to participate and attached an instruction sheet to the email.

The instruction sheet was detailed and it contained a hyperlink to the survey thus allowing the access and completion of the correctional officer stress survey to be a smooth process for the participants. Also, a deadline of participation was provided to those county jail administrators to ensure the data was collected and documented in a timely manner. Those county jail administrators were advised that the correctional officer's participating in the correctional officer stress survey identities were confidential. The survey process was implemented appropriately so the data can be collected with accuracy. However, there are strengths and weakness to conducting employee surveys. (See Appendix A).

One of the strengths of the correctional officer survey is that it may be used by correctional officers as a foundation so they could provide recommendations to their agencies concerning stress management. The correctional officer stress survey provided correctional officers an opportunity to recommend any stress management programs to the researcher. County jail administrators could use this information to improve or reduce stress in their working environments. Another strength of collecting the correctional officer stress survey data was that it could serve as a reference for county jail administrators so that they could evaluate the current policies and procedures governing the implementation of stress management teams for correctional officers employed within their institutions. Also, those county jail administrators could review this research and determine when the appropriate time would be to make adjustments in their jails, if needed. There are weaknesses that may develop from this survey as well. A weakness

which could develop from collecting the correctional officer stress survey data is that some county jail administrators may perceive that their current policies may be exposed to the fact that they are not conducive, to offering adequate programs geared towards assisting their correctional officers in managing stress or reducing stress. The survey used was confidential and did not identify the participants. Sometimes respondents feel if they are identified they may have a fear of reprisal. This is a major issue in collecting data for employee surveys and could be viewed as a weakness. Another weakness in collecting data was the duty post the correctional officers were assigned to within the county jails. Some county jails have current restrictions for line staff not allowing correctional officers to access to the internet. Depending on the correctional officer's duty post within the county jails, these posts may or may not have had a computer to access the online survey. Due to limited internet access, some county jail administrators delegated posts where this survey can be accessed. Some correctional officers volunteered to take the online survey at their homes. The actual environment a correctional officer participated in the survey may or may not have influenced their individual responses.

Again, it is critical county jail administrators understand how excessive stress can affect the correctional officers that police their facilities and be supportive in managing the correctional officer's psychological needs which sometimes are overlooked. The results of the correctional officer stress survey data will be a tool used to bring about positive changes in Florida county jails and to help assist correctional officers to recognize, reduce and manage their stressors in and out of their working environments. The correctional officer stress survey provided the researcher and county jail administrator's current results containing the most important and the least important stress factors experienced by correctional officers, in those, Florida, county jails. It is the results of the survey that could be used as an instrument to refine Florida's county jail policies as they relate to correctional officer stress. The data in the graphs, from the correctional officer stress survey, displayed the main findings in detail that correctional officers are experiencing.

Results

The results collected from the correctional officers stress survey disclosed the stress factors that men and women employed as correctional officers chose as having the greatest stress impact on their careers and in their everyday lives. After the deadline was reached, the data was examined. The data collected from the correctional officer survey was analyzed using an online survey program. As the correctional officers submitted their responses, the online survey program audited the answers. A total of one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-seven correctional officers were solicited as participants in the correctional officer stress survey. A total response of three hundred seventy-five was received. That was twenty-two percent of the total population surveyed. The answers were then strategically graphed by the survey program as the data was received. This process allowed the researcher to document the findings appropriately and accurately. The data was then shared with the administrators of those county jails whom participated

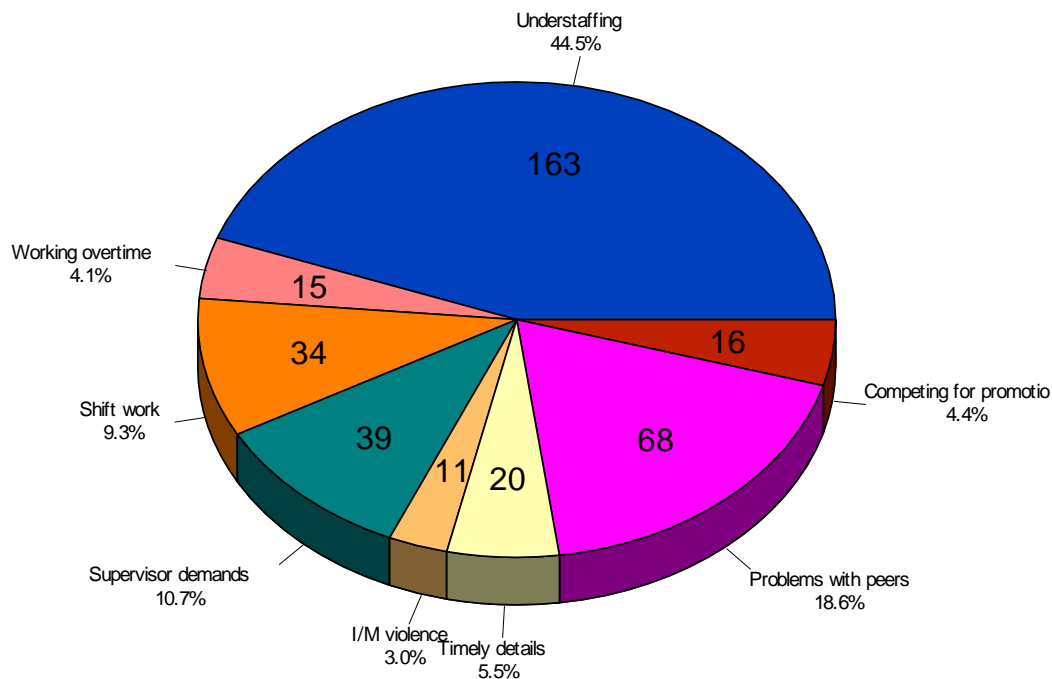
in the correctional officer stress survey. The data collected was not specific to just one agency but a collection of data from agencies participating in the survey. Once the results of the data were disseminated, those participating agencies could view the overall consensus of the correctional officer's stressors affecting our profession.

It is my opinion, people in our great country believe that correctional officers are immune to the effects of the economic crisis here in the United States. This is ultimately far from the truth. The truth is correctional officers also could be the victims of layoffs as the growth population of criminals rise within our institutions, at a rapid pace. This causes stress for the correctional officer. Federal, state, and local jails have experienced job hiring restrictions, layoffs, and a reduction in funding for raises. Low pay, understaffing, and correctional officers working overtime excessively, causes organizational job stressors. Many county jails in Florida have seen a number of layoffs and budget cuts. The consequences of budget cuts and layoffs have led to job burnout and correctional officers having to work excessive overtime.

The correctional officers that participated in the correctional officer survey chose understaffing as the most stress factor they were experiencing within their social structures overall. A total of one hundred sixty-three participants, which is forty-five percent of the total respondents, chose this stressor. It is evident that today's low economic crisis has an enormous effect on agencies budgets. They are having to consolidate jobs, reduce hiring and conduct layoffs. (See Diagram 1).

Diagram1

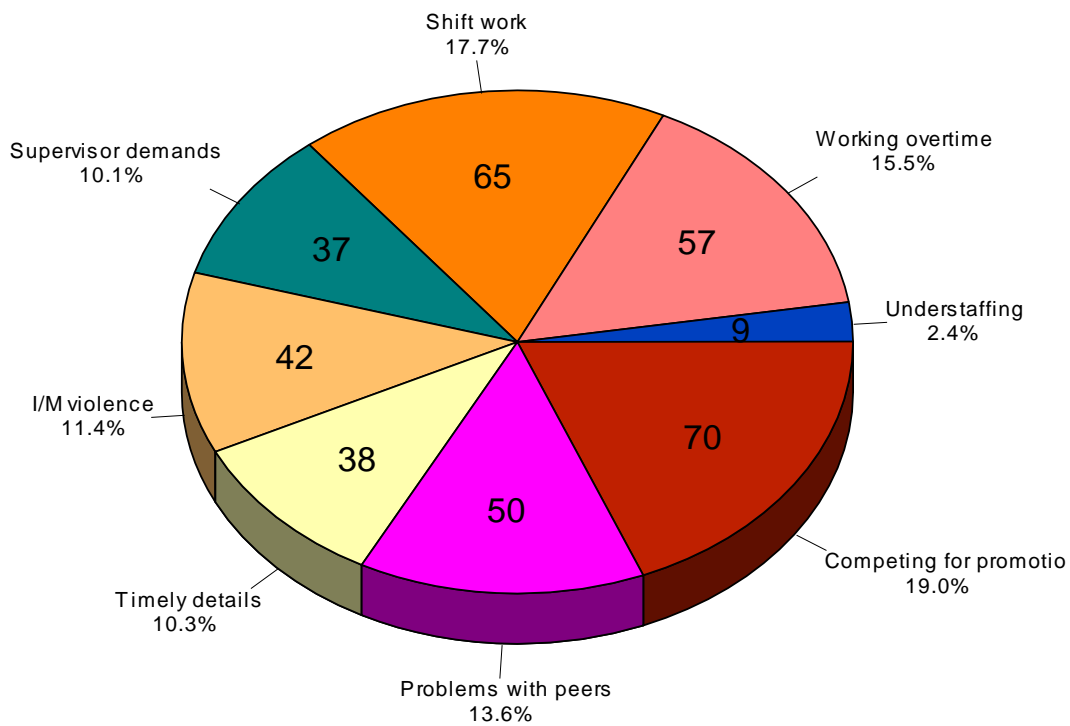
Which stress factor affects you the most?



The correctional officers that participated in the correctional officer stress survey chose competing for promotion as the least stress factor they were experiencing in their social structures overall. A total of seventy participants, which is nineteen percent of the total respondents, chose this stressor. In many agencies today, correctional officers must prepare themselves emotionally for any legitimate promotional opportunity. A correctional officer must be able to deal with stress adequately and while they are competing one must be able to hide their personal problems as well. Some problems they may endure are children and marital problems. Also, the results collected in this survey maybe reflective of the fact that many agencies may be slower in offering promotions due to the low economy crisis, lower funding for promotions, and because many agencies consolidated jobs within their institutions. (See Diagram 2).

Diagram 2

Which stress factor affects you the least?

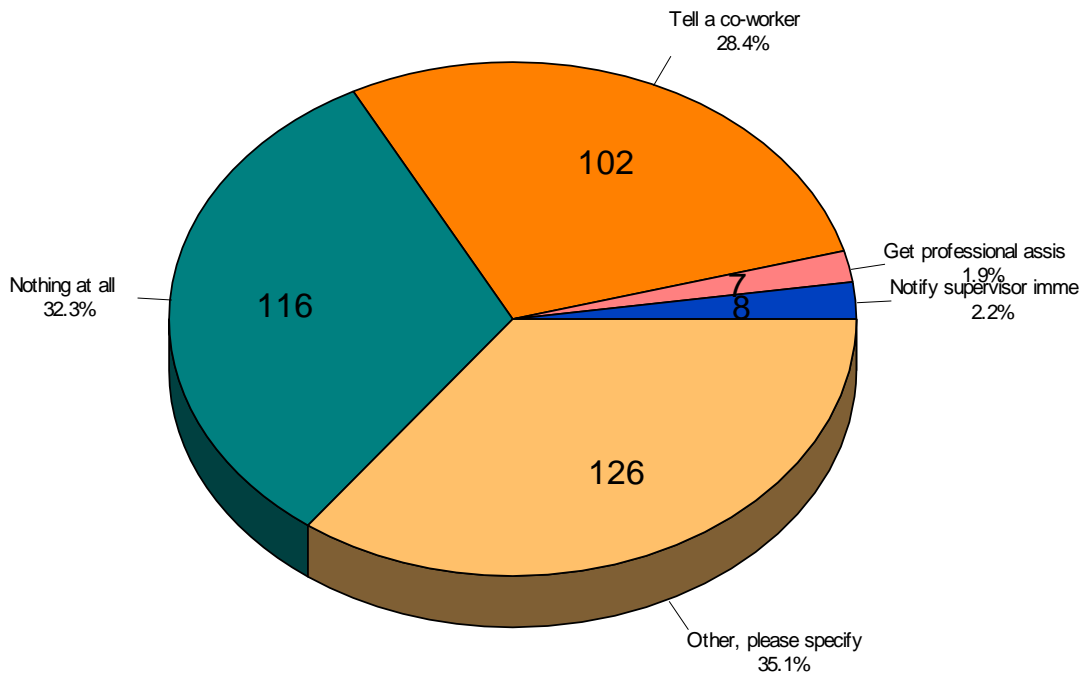


According to the data collected from the correctional officer stress survey, most correctional officers find other ways to deal with stress while they are on the job other than notifying a supervisor or counting on their individual agencies to aide them managing or reducing the stress. According to the data collected from the correctional officer survey, a total of one hundred twenty-six respondents, which is thirty-five percent of the

total population surveyed, say they will implement other techniques to resolve the stress on their own. Also noted was correctional officers either told a co-worker or did nothing at all to manage stress. Those percentages ranged from twenty-eight to thirty-two percent. (See Diagram 3).

Diagram 3

When you get stressed at work, what do you do?



Discussion

The results of the correctional officer stress survey revealed the stress correctional officers experienced and how organizational stress affected not only their job performances but, their lives.

One original research question was, does organizational stress still exist within county jails and does it have an impact on correctional officers today? The answer to both of these questions is, yes. Earlier research examined specific job-related stress factors which had a direct impact on how correctional officers performed their duties. Excessive stress caused the correctional officers to perform in mannerisms not consistent with institutional practices and they weren't safe. The commitment of those organizations to be pro-active in recognizing the stress issues the correctional officers were

experiencing, the programs they implemented to assist in helping the correctional officer deal with excessive stress, and the policy changes made over the years aided in promoting working environments that were mission oriented. Those same needs and organizational characters have not changed. As previously mentioned, excessive stress causes job burnout and high turnover rates for correctional officers.

There were limitations to this study conducted. As previously mentioned, though our society is inundated with using the Internet as one primary means of communication, the authorization of its use in a correctional setting is interrupted by policy restrictions. In future studies, it is my recommendation correctional officers have a freer opportunity to communicate their stressors in ways that are productive for the agency as a whole, and with the correctional officers having no fear of reprisals. Agencies should promote surveying their own social structures and address their issues internally. I feel county jail administrators can produce a higher number of participants if they survey their environments. The correctional officer must feel they are important and that the agency truly cares about them. Though, I solicited only seven county jails in Florida, there are sixty county jails in Florida not represented in this research. The data that could be obtained from those facilities not represented in this survey, as it relates to correctional officer stress, would be vital to any future research project of this nature. Also, as the economic crisis continues to improve it is my opinion the stress factors may change when staffing becomes more adequate within these agencies.

Over these past few years, layoffs from businesses throughout the country and some job reductions have had a negative impact on our families and our financial resources as a whole. People in our societies have resorted in many unsavory means to provide for their families and simply to survive. The stress of coping with the economic crises has subsequently had many people resort to drug and excessive alcohol usage. Those types of negative stress management techniques result in more crimes being committed within our communities. Understaffing has been identified as the most stress factor correctional officers are experiencing. This stressor coupled with other stress factors experienced by the correctional officer makes it difficult for those correctional officers to maintain a safe environment while almost ignoring the stress they are experiencing.

Recommendations

As I previously mentioned, the effects of excessive stress on the correctional officers will compromise institutional safety, cost agencies money, and create stress for other staff because the stress will degrade a correctional officer's ability to perform their job, as they were trained. Again, county jails must implement the necessary changes to their plans in dealing with correctional stress to always ensure their greatest asset, the correctional officer, is protected. The following recommendations found in my research appear to be adequate in assisting agencies to help manage or reduce correctional officer stress;

- Agencies must show concern for their employees by demonstrating that the department or division cares about its staff as human beings, not just as employees. The Volusia County Branch Jail has an Employee Relations Committee (ERC) developed to listen to correctional officer's concerns and address their needs appropriately.
- Improve correctional officer morale within your agencies by enhancing morale and increase institutional safety by reducing distractions caused by stress.
- Improve relations with any union and work on any program so it is beneficial to both parties involved.
- Implement inter-departmental and outside professional stress management teams. These teams should be overseen by a mental health professional to help aide correctional officers and their families in dealing with everyday life stressors and not just when a critical incident occurs.
- Develop wellness or fitness programs for correctional officers. These types of programs assist in helping the correctional officers reduce stress. An officer recommended taking martial arts, specifically Tai Chi, as great stress reliever. Its benefit is health oriented.
- Develop return-to-work strategies for helping correctional officers to gradually return to the jail after they have experienced a critical incident and ensure administrators monitor their reactions carefully.
- Monitor stress program activities and evaluate their effectiveness in reducing stress.
- Agencies must ensure they maintain confidentiality, provide an array of services, not just debriefings, after critical incidents. They must train supervisors to recognize and refer officers whom may be experiencing stress. They must change the correctional organization itself in ways that will reduce or manage correctional officer stress.
- Agencies must address staff burnout.
- Provide any necessary training to supervisors to aide them to be better prepared in dealing with staff during a low economic crisis era.

Captain Rodney Prince is currently employed at the Volusia County Branch Jail, in Daytona Beach, Florida. He has been working in corrections for 19 years. He has worked in both prison and jail institutions over these years. He currently works as one of four Shift Commanders in the Branch Jail. He also assists in training newly promoted supervisors.

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Appendix A

SLP Research Survey_Prince

Respondents:	375 displayed, 375 total	Status:	Closed
Launched Date:	04/13/2011	Closed Date:	06/02/2011
Display:	<input type="text" value="Display as chart"/>		
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1. How long have you been employed as a correctional officer?

	Response Total	Response Percent
0-5 years	112	30%
6-10 years	93	25%
11-15 years	86	23%
More than 16 years	81	22%
Total Respondents		372
(skipped this question)		3

2. How often do you exercise on a weekly basis?

	Response Total	Response Percent
1-2 days	119	32%
3-4 days	159	43%
5-6 days	35	9%
7 days	5	1%
Not at all	55	15%
Total Respondents		373
(skipped this question)		2

3. Which stress factor affects you the most?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Understaffing		163	45%
Working overtime		15	4%
Shift work		34	9%
Supervisor demands		39	11%
Threat of inmate violence		11	3%
Completing details timely		20	5%
Problems with peers		68	19%
Competing for promotions		16	4%
		Total Respondents	366
		(skipped this question)	9

4. Which stress factor affects you the least?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Understaffing		9	2%
Working overtime		57	15%
Shift work		65	18%
Supervisor demands		37	10%
Threat of inmate violence		42	11%
Completing details timely		38	10%
Problems with peers		50	14%
Competing for promotions		70	19%
		Total Respondents	368
		(skipped this question)	7

5. Which one of these factors listed below would you like to see improve on the job?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Understaffing		270	74%
Working overtime		32	9%
Shift work		22	6%
Supervisor demands		39	11%
		Total Respondents	363
		(skipped this question)	12





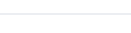
6. Which stress indicator would you like to see improve in your life?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Living a healthier lifestyle		97	26%
Increased pay rate		222	60%
Get help in heavy workloads		27	7%
Being recognized by supervisors for exceptional work performance		24	6%
		Total Respondents	370
		(skipped this question)	5



7. When you get stressed at work, what do you do?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Notify my supervisor immediately		8	2%
Get professional assistance		7	2%
Tell a co-worker		102	28%
Nothing at all		116	32%
Other, please specify		126	35%
view			
		Total Respondents	359
		(skipped this question)	16



8. When you get stressed after you leave work, what do you do?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Workout / enjoy a hobby		150	41%
Drink alcohol		21	6%
Vent to someone / counseling		51	14%
Withdraw / watch TV, use computer		86	23%
Other, please specify view		58	16%
		Total Respondents	366
		(skipped this question)	9

9. Do you sometimes feel that the stress you experience in the workplace has impacted the sense of pride you have in your work?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Yes		174	47%
No		195	53%
		Total Respondents	369
		(skipped this question)	6

10. Have you ever used the Employee Assistance Program or a similar type of program to address stress management?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Yes		42	11%
No		329	89%
		Total Respondents	371
		(skipped this question)	4