

Public Perception of Corrections: The Dark Side of the Force

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Abstract

What causes a normally law abiding individual to attempt to smuggle contraband into a correctional facility? Is it because the general public has such a poor perception of the correctional setting? This study will examine the public's perception of corrections. This study reviews past research and compares that with current research to attempt to establish how the public's perception was formed and if it has changed in recent years. Outside stimuli which influence the public's perception of corrections will be reviewed. Possible ways to attempt to change the public's perception of corrections will be discussed with examples of successful strategies that have been employed to create a positive influence of corrections in the public's eye.

Introduction

This study will attempt to answer the questions as to how the public, as well as law enforcement, view the correctional profession. The public generally does not want to know or does not care what happens in jails or prisons. How did this lack of caring about one of the larger segments of law enforcement come about? What outside stimuli has influenced this view? Knowing there is an apathetic attitude towards the correctional profession, what is the correctional community doing to correct or improve the public's perception? Are the various corrections departments doing anything to influence the public's opinion of corrections?

Jails and prisons are seen as a "necessary evil" in our society. While our society requires that the segment of the population that cannot function within the rules of society be separated and punished, the public generally does not want to be involved in the process. As a rule no one wishes a jail or prison to be built in their neighborhood, but this same segment of the population will want all those who do not abide by societies rules be "locked up". Even those members of the law enforcement community who are not directly involved with the local correctional facilities are not aware of how a correctional facility functions.

Literature Review

Throughout the history of corrections the public has not shown an interest in the correctional role in the law enforcement community. Corrections personnel are stereotyped as "unceasingly brutal, often stupid correctional officers who happily practice sadism as an art form" (Freeman, 2001). These stereotypes are fostered by such movies as *The Longest Yard*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Escape from*

Alcatraz and Shawshank Redemption. Films such as these “evoke audience sympathy for underdog inmates and contempt and revulsion for sadistic prison staff” (Freeman, 2001). There are exceptions to these portrayals such as Tom Hanks in the Green Mile where he is portrayed as a “compassionate correctional officer” (Freeman, 2001). With this as the main perception the public sees, it is understandable that the public has such a negative view of corrections. Now, add the news media, who only report negative actions with headlines such as, Jail Guard Arrested, even though the officer in question has not been employed as a corrections officer for several years. While these headlines may provoke interest, these same headlines contribute to the negative public perception.

In researching this topic several articles as well as previous surveys were reviewed. A survey that was conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections that included the general public, media and Department of Corrections staff, was utilized to demonstrate how poor the public’s perception of corrections is. This survey showed that over 50% of the general public and the media believe that correctional officers are armed inside the secure area of the institution. This survey inquired whether correctional officers and police officers should make the same salary and why. Also, the same groups of respondents were asked to describe, in one or two words, a typical correctional officer. The public responded with descriptions from tough, brave and underpaid to under-trained, lazy and stern. The media responded with tough, brave and dedicated to crazy, employed and frustrated. The Florida Department of Corrections staff responded with dedicated professional and underpaid to good, courageous and fair. (Corrections in FL, 1998).

The correctional community has an “identity crisis”. But what can the corrections community do to improve the public’s perception? Clearly community involvement is important. However, if a member of the public had a choice between a “ride along” with a deputy or a tour of the jail which would they choose? “The out of sight, out of mind” mentality is one problem that we face in corrections. We don’t educate the public about prisons; we allow them to rely on stories and anecdotal reports. It is also a problem because we cannot counteract those anecdotes with good data. “Right now we are not on the same page nationwide”, stated Secretary Jeffery Beard of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (Etter, 2006). A good rapport with the media is essential to improving the public’s perception of corrections. According to Melinda Brazzale, the PIO for the Wyoming DOC, “Our philosophy is the more we tell the public the better. We learned very early on that it didn’t benefit us to refuse information to the press.” (Etter, 2006)

Communication and community involvement are just two ways the correctional profession can improve its image. Agencies such as the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office in Tampa, Florida encourage jail tours. In 2004, the Hillsborough County Jail hosted 326 tours with 4,063 participants. The corrections community must demand professional conduct from the members. For corrections to be a profession and improve its image, we must be professional. Only when we improve our community relations and open our jails,

prisons, and facilities for public scrutiny, as well as become true professionals, can we begin to improve the public's perception of corrections (Parrish, 2005).

Method

In order to gain insight to the public's current perception of corrections, 300 surveys were sent or delivered to the media, the public, law enforcement agencies and Volusia County Division of Corrections. Surveys were also placed in places of public access such as stores, restaurants and local schools (for teachers, staff and parents).

One survey was to determine if the public's perception of corrections has changed in the last 10 years. The media, public and Volusia County Division of Corrections staff were surveyed, asking these groups to describe in one or two words a typical correctional officer without prompts or suggestions. This was to see if any change has occurred since this survey was presented to these same groups in 1997. Police officers were also added to this survey to obtain their perception of correctional officers. (See Appendix C)

Surveys were also conducted to attempt to determine how much the respondent knew about corrections and where the respondent received their knowledge from. The respondents were asked what most influenced their perception of corrections; whether it was the news media and TV, Hollywood and the movie industry or having worked in the field of corrections or knowing someone who does. The respondent was asked if they have ever worked in the field of corrections, has ever had a desire to work in the field of corrections or wishes to learn more about the correctional profession; asking if the respondent felt that correctional officers should make as much as police officers was included in the survey. (See Appendix B)

As the correctional side of law enforcement goes hand in hand with the enforcement side, the respondents were asked about whether a police officer or deputy is a professional and whether a correctional officer is a professional. Also included in the survey was whether or not a correctional officer's duty is equally important to police officers duties. The respondents were also asked to rate the importance of jails and prisons to our society.

Personal contacts within the correctional community were utilized to gain information as to whether or not their agencies have a public information officer dedicated to just their department/agency or utilize the Public Information Officer for their city, county or state agency. Also asked was what does your correctional division/section endorse or plan to put corrections in a positive light.

In gaining research material, personal experience was utilized along with conversations with the public and other members of the law enforcement community. In speaking with members of this class insight was gained as to how little members of the enforcement side of law enforcement understand about the correctional side of law enforcement.

Results

Of the 300 surveys that were distributed 119 two word surveys were returned (39%) and 148 twelve question surveys were returned (49%). The two word surveys were initially grouped by the focus group each was given. Then, cumulative findings were tallied. The twelve question surveys were all totaled as a group and the findings left as one response.

A total of 50 two word surveys were delivered to the news media. Twelve were returned. One local newspaper did not return any surveys reporting “no one wished to fill one out”. The results are as follows:

Response	Number of responses	Percentage of Responses	Response	Number of responses	Percentage of Responses
Under Appreciated	3	15%	Mean	1	5%
Big	1	5%	Middle-aged	1	5%
Diligent	1	5%	Overloaded	1	5%
Gruff	1	5%	Rules	1	5%
Guard	1	5%	Stern	1	5%
Helpful	1	5%	Tough	1	5%
Jail	1	5%	Uncaring	1	5%
Law	1	5%	Unsatisfied	1	5%
Male	1	5%	Warrior	1	5%

*Some respondents gave only one word responses.

A total of 25 two word surveys were given to civilian staff in the department where I am employed, with 20 being returned. The results were as follows.

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Observant	4	10%	Disciplinarian	1	2.5%
Professional	4	10%	Fair	1	2.5%
Authoritative	3	7.5%	Firm	1	2.5%
Detail Oriented	3	7.5%	Friendly	1	2.5%
Consistent	2	5%	Honest	1	2.5%
Hard Working	2	5%	Knowledgeable	1	2.5%
Patient	2	5%	Law Enforcement	1	2.5%
Arrogant	1	2.5%	Loud	1	2.5%

Authority Figure	1	2.5%	Outgoing	1	2.5%
Committed	1	2.5%	Overweight	1	2.5%
Corrective Reinforcement	1	2.5%	Stern	1	2.5%
Courteous	1	2.5%	Structured	1	2.5%
Dedicated	1	2.5%	Underpaid	1	2.5%
Diligent	1	2.5%			

A total of 100 surveys were given to law enforcement agencies as well as being placed in the ID/Receiving area of the Volusia County Branch Jail. Thirty-four were returned.

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of responses	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Professional	12	17.6%	Brave	1	1.4%
Underpaid	5	7.3%	Caretakers	1	1.4%
Needed	3	4.4%	Cautious	1	1.4%
Overworked	3	4.4%	Committed	1	1.4%
Dedicated	2	2.9%	Community minded	1	1.4%
Good	2	2.9%	Hardworking	1	1.4%
Happy	2	2.9%	Needs Improvement	1	1.4%
Honest	2	2.9%	In House Law Enforcement	1	1.4%
Integrity	2	2.9%	Needs Improvement	1	1.4%
Lawmen	2	2.9%	Routine	1	1.4%
Necessary	2	2.9%	Stressed-out	1	1.4%
Patient	2	2.9%	Steady	1	1.4%
Safe	2	2.9%	Strong	1	1.4%
Under trained	2	2.9%	Strong Character	1	1.4%
Alert	1	1.4%	Tolerant	1	1.4%
Anti-cop	1	1.4%	Want to be cop	1	1.4%
Asset to Community	1	1.4%			

*Some respondents gave only one word responses.

A total of 55 surveys were received from civilians. The results are as follows:

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Authoritative	7	6.6%	Harsh	1	.9%
Tough	6	5.6%	Honest	1	.9%
Intimidating	4	3.7%	In Charge	1	.9%
Responsible	4	3.7%	Intent	1	.9%
Stern	4	3.7%	Jerk	1	.9%
Strict	4	3.7%	Know It Alls	1	.9%
Underpaid	4	3.7%	Mean	1	.9%
Controlling	3	2.8%	Military	1	.9%
Forceful	3	2.8%	Misrepresented	1	.9%
Law Abiding	3	2.8%	Misunderstood	1	.9%
Arrogant	2	1.8%	Non-Compassionate	1	.9%
Helpful	2	1.8%	Overworked	1	.9%
Listen	2	1.8%	Peacekeeper	1	.9%
Patient	2	1.8%	Prison Guard	1	.9%
Professional	2	1.8%	Prone to Violence	1	.9%
Serious	2	1.8%	Protects Society	1	.9%
Overworked	2	1.8%	Safety Oriented	1	.9%
Abrasive	1	.9%	Scattered Workforce	1	.9%
Aggressive	1	.9%	School Based Officer	1	.9%
Athletic	1	.9%	Spiteful	1	.9%
Better than You	1	.9%	Strategic	1	.9%
Big Shots	1	.9%	Stressed	1	.9%
Bully	1	.9%	Strong	1	.9%
Consistent	1	.9%	Structured	1	.9%
Disciplinarian	1	.9%	Supportive	1	.9%
Dishonest	1	.9%	Thorough	1	.9%
Domineering	1	.9%	Tolerant	1	.9%
Dutiful	1	.9%	Uncaring	1	.9%
Egotistical	1	.9%	Unappreciated	1	.9%
Enforcer	1	.9%	Uneducated	1	.9%
Example	1	.9%	Un-personable	1	.9%
Firm	1	.9%	Scrutinized (By the media)	1	.9%

Foulmouthed	1	.9%	Protects the environment	1	.9%
Crowd Control Officer	1	.9%	My Dad	1	.9%
Correctional Officer	1	.9%			

*Some respondents gave only one word responses.

The following is a cumulative result of all the two word surveys received. These responses were the top 20 of the 238 responses received in the Two Word Survey:

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Professional	18	7%	Responsible	4	2%
Underpaid	11	4%	Strict	4	2%
Authorative	10	4%	Under Appreciated	4	2%
Stern	6	3%	Arrogant	4	2%
Tough	6	3%	Controlling	4	2%
Overworked	5	2%	Dedicated	4	2%
Hardworking	4	2%	Detail Oriented	4	2%
Intimidating	4	2%	Forceful	4	2%
Observant	4	2%	Law Abiding	4	2%
Patient	4	2%	Needed	4	2%

In computing the data collected from the 12 Question Survey, the results are as follows: Of the 300 surveys sent 148 surveys were received.

Question 1

How would you rate the importance of jails and prisons to our society?

- a. Very Important 88%
- b. Somewhat important 10%
- c. Not Important 2%

Question 2

How would you rate your personal knowledge of what a correctional officer's duties are?

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| a. Very knowledgeable | 29% |
| b. Somewhat knowledgeable | 36% |
| c. Knows very little. | 25% |
| d. Knows nothing | 10% |

Question 3

How would you rate the importance of what a correctional officer's duties are compared to a police officer or deputies duties?

- | | |
|-------------------|-----|
| a. More Important | 4% |
| b. Equal to | 80% |
| c. Less Important | 16% |

Question 4

Should a correctional officer's wages be more than, the same, or less than a police officer or deputies' wages?

- | | |
|------------------|-----|
| a. Make more | 7% |
| b. Make the same | 67% |
| c. Make less | 26% |

Question 5

Do you consider a police officer or deputy a professional?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 93% |
| b. No | 7% |

Question 6

Do you consider a correctional officer a professional?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 90% |
| b. No | 10% |

Question 7

Which of the answers below best describes what has been the greatest influence on your perception of corrections?

- | | |
|---|-----|
| a. Worked or knows someone in corrections | 60% |
| b. T.V. and newspapers | 29% |
| c. Hollywood and the movies | 11% |

Question 8

Have you ever worked in the field of corrections?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 24% |
| b. No | 76% |

Question 9

Have you ever considered work in the field of corrections?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 30% |
| b. No | 70% |

Question 10

If given the opportunity, would you be interested in learning more about the field of corrections?

- | | |
|--------|-----|
| a. Yes | 49% |
| b. No | 51% |

Question 11

How would you fit into the following category?

- | | |
|---|-----|
| a. Worked as a correctional officer | 13% |
| b. Worked as a police officer/deputy | 26% |
| c. Family member/friend has worked as a correctional officer or police officer/deputy | 33% |
| d. No relations or friends in the criminal Justice field | 28% |

Question 12

Male or Female?

- | | |
|-----------|-----|
| a. Male | 53% |
| b. Female | 47% |

Age?

- | | |
|-------------|-----|
| a. Under 21 | 14% |
| b. 21-35 | 31% |
| c. 36-45 | 26% |
| d. 46-60 | 24% |
| e. Over 60 | 5% |

Discussion

The results show that the public knows little about the field of corrections but does have a willingness to learn more about corrections. A large percentage of the respondents to the 12-question survey believe that jails and prisons are a very important part of our society. Many of the respondents, while they are not very knowledgeable of the correctional officers' duties, believe that correctional officer's duties are as important as police officers. The results show that a majority of the respondents believe that police and correctional officers are professionals and, that the duties of a police officer and correctional officer are equal. The majority also believes that the salaries should also be equal (67%).

The results of the 12 Question Survey indicate that a majority describe their greatest influence on their perception of corrections is by knowing someone

in the field of corrections. This was followed by knowledge gleaned from TV and the news media, then Hollywood and the movies. A majority of the respondents report that they have never worked in corrections and have never considered working in the field of corrections. Taking this into consideration almost half of the respondents report they would be interested in learning more about the field of corrections.

With the two word survey the top response I received in the cumulative total was professional at 7%. In comparing my results to a similar survey done in 1997 by the Florida Department of Corrections the top response was tough at 10.8%. In the survey I conducted tough tied for fourth overall in a combination of all surveys 3%. In the survey conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections professional was not listed as a response (Corrections FI, 1998).

The response of the media was disappointing. Of the 50 surveys given to the media, only 12 were completed. It was disappointing that the media chose not to participate and have their opinions heard. Where tough was the top response in the 1997 survey, the survey I conducted had under-appreciated as the top response. Correctional staff polled in 1997 had dedicated and professional as the top two responses. The survey I conducted had observant and professional as the top response and authoritative as second (Corrections FI, 1998).

The question then becomes, is the perception of corrections changing? The 1997 survey the description of professional did not make the top 20. In the survey I conducted professional was the top response. I believe this shows a shift in public perception of correction (Corrections FI, 1998).

These results show that the majority of the public believes correctional officers are professionals and a larger than anticipated portion of the public want to learn more about the field of corrections. It is interesting that 67% of the respondents to the 12-question survey believe that corrections officers should make the same as police officers/deputies.

Does this mean that there is a shift in public perception? I believe so. Corrections does not seem to be the "black sheep" of the law enforcement family it was ten years ago. With a show such as American Jails on TV giving a more realistic portrayal of what happens in jails across the United States, some corrections departments encourage public tours and "open" up their jails to the public.

This study was conducted over a limited amount of time and with a limited group of people. If this survey was to be conducted over a longer period of time and with a larger group the results could differ.

Recommendations

While it appears that the public's perception of corrections has improved favorably over the last ten years, there is still room for improvement. The question that comes to the forefront is what can be done to better educate the public as to what are the duties and responsibilities of the corrections profession, but still maintain the security and integrity of the facility.

- One option would be to insure that the department or county Public Information Officer is familiar with the jail. Does the Public Information Officer understand the idiosyncrasies of running a corrections facility? Has the PIO ever toured the jail?
- Second, the idea of encouraging staff to belong to civic groups and to be more involved in the community would have corrections officers in the public to portray corrections in a positive light as well as to help dispel some of the myths previously mentioned (unceasingly brutal, often stupid correctional officers).
- Third, educate and train staff. Staff needs to realize that when ever they are in the public's eye they are ambassadors for the corrections profession.
- Fourth, utilize the media. Establish a good working relationship with the local media, put forth positive accomplishments by the department not just the negative. Keep an open line of communication with the local news agencies.
- Finally, in order to improve the public's perception of corrections one must educate; educate the public, educate staff and educate elected officials. Utilize every medium available, TV, radio, internet and newspapers, to show the jail or detention center in a positive light. Only as the public is more informed is it more likely there will begin to be positive changes in the public's perception of corrections.

Captain Bart Masker has been a corrections officer with the Volusia County Division of Corrections since 1987. He has worked as a Unit Officer, Housing Unit Supervisor and Shift Commander. Bart is also an Inspector for the Florida Model Jail Standards where he worked to update the format currently used in preparation of Final Reports of County Jail Inspectors. Bart has an associate's degree in Criminal Justice from the Florida Keys Community College.

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Appendix A

I am currently participating in the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Senior Leadership Program. As a part of this program I am conducting a research project on the public's perception of corrections. I have created the attached survey to gather information to assist in this research.

I am asking for your assistance in gathering information for this project by completing the attached survey. You do not need to put your name on this survey; it is anonymous. All survey responses will be analyzed and reported in the aggregate (i.e., as a group).

I thank you in advance for taking the time to complete the attached survey.

Captain Bart Masker
Volusia County Division of Corrections

Appendix B

INSTRUCTIONS: PLEASE MARK (X OR ✓) THE RESPONSE THAT IS CLOSEST TO YOUR OPINION.
PLEASE DO NOT SKIP OR LEAVE ANY QUESTION BLANK.

Public Perception of Corrections Survey

1. How would you rate the importance of jails and prisons to our society?

- Very important.
- Somewhat important.
- Not important.

2. How would you rate your personal knowledge of what a correctional officer's duties are?

- Very knowledgeable of what a correctional officer does.
- Somewhat knowledgeable of what a correctional officer does.
- I know very little of what a correctional officer does.
- I know nothing of what a correctional officer does.

3. How would you rate the importance of what a correctional officer's duties are compared to a police officer or deputies duties?

- A correctional officer's duties are more important than police officers and deputy's duties.
- A correctional officer's duties are equal to police officers and deputy's duties.
- A correctional officer's duty is less important than a police officer or deputy.

4. Should a correctional officer's wages be more than, the same, or less than a police officers or deputies wages?

- Correctional officers should make more than a police officer or deputy.
- Correctional officers should make the same as a police officer or deputy.
- Correctional officers should make less than a police officer or deputy.

Public Perception of Corrections Survey cont.

5. Do you consider a police officer or deputy a professional?

- Yes, police officers and deputies are professionals.
- No, police officers and deputies are not professionals.

6. Do you consider a correctional officer a professional?

- Yes, correctional officers are professionals
- No, correctional officers are not professionals.

7. Which of the answers below best describes what has been the greatest influence on your perception of corrections?

- I have worked in the field of corrections or know someone who works in the field.
- The media such as TV news and newspapers have been the greatest influence on my perception of corrections.
- Hollywood and movies have been the greatest influence on my perception of corrections.

8. Have you ever worked in the field of corrections?

- Yes, I have worked in the field of corrections.
- No, I have not worked in the field of corrections.

9. Have you ever considered work in the field of corrections?

- Yes, I have considered working in the field of corrections.
- No, I have never considered working in the field of corrections

10. If given the opportunity would you be interested in learning more about the field of corrections?

- Yes, I would be interested in learning more about the field of corrections.
- No, I would not be interested in learning more about the field of corrections.

Public Perception of Corrections Survey cont.

11. How would you fit into the following category?

Please choose one.

- Worked as a correctional officer.
- Worked as a police officer/deputy.
- Family member/friend has worked as a correctional officer or LEO.
- No relations or friends in the field of criminal justice.

12. Now if you could please tell me a little about yourself.

- Male
- Female

- Under21
- 21-35
- 36-45
- 46-60
- Over 60

Appendix C

Please complete the survey below to assist in obtaining data for a research project through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Senior Leadership Program. You do not have to include your name. Thank you for your time.

Please choose the following category which best describe you:

Civilian

Media

Corrections

Deputy/Police

What two words would you use to describe the typical correctional officer?

1. _____

2. _____

Appendix D

Results from the 1998 Opinion Survey conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections (Media respondents were only asked to list one word)

News Media's Descriptions of COs	Number	Percent
1. Tough	22	8.6%
2. Brave	19	7.5%
3. Dedicated	15	5.9%
4. Stressed	13	5.1%
5. Underpaid	12	4.7%
6. Undereducated	11	4.3%
7. Guard	8	3.1%
8-10. (tied) Crazy, Employed, Frustrated	5	2.0%

*Information can be found at <http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/survey/index.html>

Appendix E

Results from the 1998 Opinion Survey conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections

DC Staff Descriptions of COs	Number	Percent
1. Dedicated	93	15.5%
2. Professional	75	12.5%
3. Underpaid	45	7.5%
4. Brave	33	5.5%
5. Hardworking	22	3.7%
6. Overworked	16	2.7%
7. Stressed	12	2.0%
8. Good	11	1.8%
9-10. (tied) Courageous, Fair, Security	10	1.7%

*Information can be found at <http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/survey/index.html>

Appendix F

Results from the 1998 Opinion Survey conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections

(The top 20 most frequent responses by the general public are listed.)		
General Public's Descriptions of COs	Number	Percent
1. Tough	53	10.8%
2. Brave	47	9.6%
3. Underpaid	36	7.3%
4. Dedicated	31	6.3%
5. Strong	30	6.1%
6. Mean	17	3.5%
7. Big	16	3.3%
8. Honest	15	3.1%
9. Patient	13	2.7%
10. Fair	12	2.4%
11. Good	12	2.4%
12. Hardworking	12	2.4%
13. Overworked	12	2.4%
14. Crazy	11	2.2%
15. Courageous	10	2.0%
16. Hard	10	2.0%

17. Under-Trained	10	2.0%
18. Lazy	9	1.8%
19. Stern	9	1.8%
20. Guard	8	1.6%

*Information can be found at <http://www.dc.state.fl.us/pub/survey/index.html>