



Correctional Psychologists and Violence

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Introduction

- While prison riots, fires and murders have seen a decrease in the prevalence over time, staff assaults have stayed consistent over time (Sorenson et al., 2011).
- Many mental health professionals who work in a correctional setting experience some form of aggressive behavior during their career, including threats of violence, physical violence, or aggressive masturbation (Leavitt et al., 2006).
- Correctional settings need psychologists due to high numbers of inmates with serious psychological diagnoses. This creates a situation wherein mental health professionals are put in an environment that has an increased risk of violence (Ferrell et al., 2000).
- Psychologists and other mental health professionals are making prisons a safer place as psychoeducational groups and individual therapy improve the functioning of inmates with serious psychological diagnoses. In many instances, their work has effectively lowered the amount of misconduct by inmates who received treatment (Auty et al., 2017).

Aggression & Burnout

- Heightened risk of violence and being around violence can lead to several negative consequences for correctional mental health professionals ranging from burnout to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Correctional psychologists must be aware of the risk and prepared to counteract the added stressors associated with the correctional setting.
- Factors such as having high amounts of stress, psychological exhaustion and depersonalizing others have been found to impact the likelihood of correctional workers developing PTSD (Boudoukha et al., 2013).
- It is important for mental health professionals in correctional settings to be aware of their own exhaustion levels and take time off as needed.
- In addition, correctional mental health professionals should engage in ongoing self-care practices, and also identify other areas of their own functioning that need extra time and attention.

Protective Factors

- Senter and colleagues (2010) found two factors that aided in counteracting stressors: developing a strong professional identity and keeping a work-life separation.
- A professional identity can be an aid as it focuses the correctional psychologist on the specific training that has prepared them for this position and it helps to keep them connected with other mental health professionals.
- For correctional psychologists, it may be easier to separate work and life issues as there is a physical manifestation to aid them, the prison walls.

Conclusion

- Violent behavior is a part of the corrections setting, sometimes made worse by inmates' psychological problems.
- Correctional psychologists have to interact with violent inmates and manage those violent behaviors as part of their position, and aid the inmates in dealing with the ramifications of their actions.
- Going forward it is important to identify the ways in which different aggressive behaviors affect mental health professionals in a correctional setting and help to provide better paths for handling these potentially traumatic events.

Warning Signs

In correctional environments, mental health professionals might experience PTSD symptoms such as:

- physical pain, tension, and stress
- cognitive-emotional symptoms such as nightmares, sleep disturbance, emotional exhaustion or other emotional problems
- relational symptoms such as cynicism, problems interacting with inmates, depersonalization, or avoiding/withdrawing from prison (Boudoukha et al., 2013)