

University of Georgia MPA

Strategies to Improve Training and Retention of Correctional Officers

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Introduction

The ability to effectively train and retain qualified employees presents a major challenge for all public agencies. This challenge is exacerbated in fields with low pay and limited prestige, such as correctional officers. From personal experience training new staff within the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC), I commonly saw new hires go through weeks of paid training to prepare them for a job in a prison. However, upon starting their new position within the prison, the new employees realized that they were not a good fit for the job. This situation presented GDC with a wide array of problems. Finding new strategies to train and retain these employees at a cost-effective rate would have had cascading effects throughout the department. This paper looks at this difficulty in workforce development and retention for correctional officers. Although this paper focuses on correctional officers, I anticipate that the recommendations and background information will be useful across many sectors that struggle with employee retention and high training costs.

This research paper has three sections. First, it presents a background on some of the major challenges of training and retaining correctional officers. This section primarily looks at the financial cost of training new employees, the effect on morale that chronic understaffing has on other staff, and the difficulties of finding qualified replacements due to rural locations and the availability of other jobs. The second section analyzes some of the root causes of low retention in the field. For many of these types of jobs, pay is low, there are limited opportunities for public recognition, and the work itself is challenging and stressful. Lastly, strategies to improve retention and improve training methodologies are explored. This includes more targeted recruitment efforts, increased financial incentives, and finding ways to increase individual investment in the job.

Challenges of Training and Retention in Low Prestige Jobs

The job title “correctional officer” usually brings to mind a very specific mental image, largely colored by popular culture references. It is also commonly thought of as a low-skill and low-training occupation. While it is true that most correctional officer positions are entry-level positions, the idea that this job does not require training or skilled employees is false. The primary job duty of a correctional officer is to keep the public and incarcerated populations safe by maintaining secure facilities. For example, the mission of the Georgia Department of Corrections is “The Georgia Department of Corrections protects the public by operating secure and safe facilities while reducing recidivism through effective programming, education, and healthcare” (Georgia Department of Corrections 2019). This duty of protecting the public encompasses a huge variety of individual tasks and skills. For most correctional officers, in order to maintain security and safety, they need to effectively manage difficult inmate populations with diverse backgrounds, aid in treatment programs for inmates, and complete various custodial jobs (Burton *et al* 2018, 26). Burton *et al* identify four primary functions for correctional officers: “(1) The management of inmates, (2) how officers maintain safety and security, (3) aiding offender rehabilitation, and (4) managing special populations in prisons” (Burton *et al* 2018, 26). In order to effectively fulfill all of these duties, correctional officers need to undergo extensive training. As of 2017, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 428,870 were employed with the job title “correctional officer” (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). With nearly half a million correctional, training for this diverse skill set is a huge cost and of vital importance to maintaining safe and secure facilities.

There is not a clear nation-wide methodology for how to train correctional officers, and the type and amount of training varies state to state. A survey on new correctional officer

trainings from 44 states, shown in Table 1 below, clearly demonstrates the range of time spent in training (Burton *et al* 2018, 30).

Training Hours	Number of states
< 99 Hours	1
100 – 199 Hours	11
200 – 299 Hours	20
300+ Hours	12

Table 1: Training hours required for new correctional officers in 44 surveyed states

Nearly every state requires more than 100 hours of training, with the plurality requiring 200-299 hours. Even assuming that 200 hours is standard, that amounts to 5 full 40 hour weeks, which is a huge level of investment for an entry-level position. The lowest paid 10% of correctional officers earn roughly \$31,000 per year (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019), or \$14.90/hour assuming 2080 hours worked each year. Thus, 200 hours of paid training amounts to, at a minimum, \$2,980 before a new correctional officer is even able to start working at a prison.

This financial burden would not be a problem if employees were staying long-term. However, this is not the case with many correctional officers. Correctional staff experiences much higher turnover than average. Some estimates for average annual turnover are as high as 45%, but most research shows the range to be closer to 12% to 25% (Minor *et al* 2009, 44). This turnover happens for a number of reasons, but the best indicators of turnover were intuitive. A study specifically looking at staff turnover in a high security state prison found that the best predictors of whether someone would leave or not were their age, their job satisfaction, and their commitment to the organization (Minor *et al* 2009, 46).

This low annual retention rate has costs beyond just the stated financial costs of training new officers. Constant turnover makes it much more likely that a prison, or any agency facing similar retention problems, will experience chronic understaffing. This understaffing forces

veteran employees to work more, leading to overtime and unanticipated budgetary strain. Additionally, even though staff members tend to like the extra pay from overtime, it puts those employees at a higher risk of burnout, which could cause them to pursue other careers. Lastly, understaffing means that any new employees coming in will immediately have high levels of responsibility due to a lack of experienced staff. Without sufficient time for a new employee to become acclimated to the job and grow more comfortable with their responsibilities, these new employees can get shocked by the transition and leave.

Beyond retention and training costs, correctional facilities can struggle to find qualified candidates to fill vacancies. In Georgia, many of the largest prisons are located in rural counties with a relatively small available labor pool. Table 2 below shows the 5 largest prisons by inmate population within Georgia, along with the city or town where they are located.

Prison Name	Inmate Capacity	Town or City	City Population
Georgia Diagnostic and Classification State Prison	2,423	Jackson, GA	4,951
Wilcox State Prison	1,840	Abbeville, GA	2,812
Macon State Prison	1,762	Oglethorpe, GA	1,282
Autry State Prison	1,712	Pelham, GA	3,673
Dooly State Prison	1,702	Unadilla, GA	3,645

Table 2: The 5 largest prisons in Georgia, their location, and the population of that city (Georgia Dept. of Corrections 2019 and Georgia Demographics 2019).

As shown in Table 2, many massive correctional facilities are located in cities with relatively small civilian populations. Although people are willing and able to commute in many cases, the remote location limits the locally available labor pool. Additionally, these locations may not be as attractive as a potential living area for new hires who would need to move in from outside the area.

Correctional officers require high levels of training in order to effectively do their job. This training ensures that their fellow staff members, the community, and the inmates within the correctional facility all stay safe and secure. However, the training comes at a high financial cost,

and there is no guarantee that people will stay in their jobs long enough to justify this initial investment. High levels of annual turnover make it difficult to keep positions filled with qualified employees, which further strains existing employees and budgets. Lastly, a lack of local applicants removes one of the main areas from which correctional facilities might replenish their employee pool. Better training and retention strategies for new hires will help to limit some of these major problems and costs, make correctional facilities safer and more secure in the long term, and aid inmates in their rehabilitation efforts.

Root Causes of Low Retention

In order to improve retention and better prepare employees to be successful in their correctional jobs, it is important to understand some of the root cause of low retention. This section looks at two of the primary drivers of low retention, with an underlying theme. First, and most straightforward, correctional officer jobs typically do not pay very well for new employees. Secondly, these jobs tend to have less prestige associated with them, which can sometimes compensate for a relatively lower income. The theme throughout this section is that potential employees are often able to find work that provides a similar paycheck with less effort.

As previously discussed, newly hired correctional officers do not make very much money at the beginning of their careers. Although salaries vary widely state to state, for the lowest 10% of employees, the annual wage is just over \$31,000. The median wage is \$44,300, and the top 10% earn more than \$76,760 annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Within just this field, there is an extremely wide range of salaries available, and for new employees with only a high school or equivalent degree, there may be other options available to make a similar amount. From personal experience, I specifically remember hearing concerns from Coastal State Prison near Savannah, GA in early 2015. A Tanger Outlet mall had just opened a few miles away from

the prison, and correctional officers and counselors were leaving their jobs to work in retail at the new mall. The wages and hours worked were similar, and the environment was far less stressful and dangerous. Maybe most importantly, they were able to bring their cell phones to work with them. In an attempt to limit contraband, only state-issued cell phones are permitted in Georgia prisons, and these are usually only given to leadership staff such as Wardens and Deputy Wardens. For employees earning at the lower end of the spectrum, leaving a challenging and stressful job in corrections for a similar-paying job in retail can be an easy decision.

The second cause of low retention among correctional officers is the lack of prestige usually associated with the position. Hans Toch, a social psychologist focused on criminology and criminal justice administration, characterized correctional officers with the following quote:

Prison guards (correctional officers) are truly imprisoned: They are not only physically confined but are locked into movie caricatures, into pejorative prophecies (sometimes self-fulfilling), into anachronistic supervision patterns, into unfair civil service definitions, into undeserved hostilities and prejudgments of their actions. Officers are imprisoned by our ignorance of who they are and what they do, which is the price they pay for working behind walls. (Toch 1981)

This feeling of imprisonment and lack of respect shows itself both in how officers view their own work within the organization, and with how the public views the work done by the officers. Interpersonal conflict and unfavorable treatment from supervisors ranked as two of the top reasons for employee turnover (Minor *et al* 2009, 52). The high-stress environment of a prison fosters a feeling in which line officers can feel misunderstood or neglected by leadership and feel as if they lack input or control over their daily work. When these officers feel devalued

within the walls of their own prison, it should not be shocking if they do not feel a strong sense of commitment to their job.

Perceptions of correctional officers do not improve when you go outside the walls of the prison, either. A 1998 Florida Department of Corrections study looked specifically at public perceptions of correctional officers. Interestingly, surveyed Florida residents tended to describe correctional officers in positive terms, referring to them as “brave”, “tough”, “dedicated”, and “strong”, among other descriptors. However, when compared to other occupations, people’s opinions begin to shift. A 1989 survey on occupational prestige asked respondents to rate the prestige of hundreds of different occupations on a scale from 1-100. The average of all occupations was 43.4; correctional officers were rated at 40 (Sundt 2009, 2). This research indicates that the public views correctional officers favorably, but the work is not perceived as very prestigious. There is much more respect for the individuals who are doing the work than for the work itself.

In short, the public views employment as a correctional officer as a valuable and necessary part of society, but generally not a job that most people would ever consider for themselves. Two thirds of survey respondents stated that they would be very unlikely to take a job as a correctional officer. Only 11% of respondents were “somewhat likely” to take that job, and only 3% were “very likely” (Sundt 2009, 5). Some of the key reasons why people were unwilling to take those jobs were the stressful environment, the perceived risk and danger of the job, and working with inmates. Prestige within a position can come from the inherent value of the work, but it is difficult to feel the same level of pride knowing that the vast majority of the population is unwilling to even attempt your job.

Correctional officers take on a challenging job to better their community, but when first starting, the pay does not measure up to the difficulty of the position. In many areas, there is an abundance of similarly-paid jobs in far less stressful environments. In terms of public perceptions, correctional work occupies a strange space. The public simultaneously respects the individuals who take on this duty, but most people cannot see themselves doing similar work. It's necessary work, but most people are happy that someone else is doing it. This level of public prestige does not do enough to compensate individuals for the size of their paycheck or for the difficulties of working in a prison.

Strategies for Improvement

The low retention rates and high training costs common with correctional officer positions have a variety of root causes. As previously discussed, the work itself is challenging and multi-faceted, it requires intensive and lengthy training to prepare, and the payoffs, both financially and in terms of public respect, are not always commensurate with the stress of the work. With so many factors driving this low retention, any solutions will be piecemeal, and they must come at the problem from multiple angles.

Three specific strategies are reviewed in this section. First, correctional facilities can use more targeted recruitment efforts when looking to fill new positions. With the right recruitment criteria in place, this could increase retention by hiring people more suited to the job long-term. Going along with this, the new hire training structure can be modified so there is not as much initial investment in training. Secondly, correctional officers can receive increased financial incentives. These can include one-time bonuses, permanent pay-scale raises, or more experimental programs to appeal to new employees and give greater incentives to stay. Lastly, and most importantly, prisons can find ways to increase individual investment in the job. This

could be done by fostering a more supportive work environment, by providing a clear pathway for advancement, and by performing community outreach in an effort to increase the pride associated with these positions. It is not realistic for a correctional facility to take on all of these strategies at once, but focusing on one or two key areas could still lead to major improvements in retention.

Targeted Recruitment

The first strategy to improve retention and training outcomes is to target recruitment efforts at a more specific population. As previously shown in the public perception section, most members of the general public are not interested in correctional work. The perceived risk and dangers of the job make it unappealing, and the highly structured chain of command can be a tough adjustment for many civilians. Recruitment efforts targeted at individuals who already have experience in that type of setting may lead to higher retention rates. One potentially underutilized labor pool is former military and public safety officials. These individuals may be much more comfortable with the strict chain of command within a prison, and previous training may allow them to better handle the dangers and risk associated with correctional work. Burton *et al* found that only 72% of states surveyed were utilizing retired military personnel when recruiting new officers, but over 90% of those states were using general job fairs or referrals from current staff (Burton *et al* 2018, 33). General public job fairs may not be the most efficient way to attract officers who will be able to succeed in the job rather than someone looking to collect a quick paycheck. Likewise, referrals from existing staff members have no guarantee of success, particularly when existing staff members turn over so frequently.

One other method of reducing expenditures on training new staff members is to split up the training, and reduce the initial investment made by correctional departments. As previously

discussed, training for these jobs is intensive and time-consuming, and is required by the diverse duties performed by correctional officers. Training someone to take on all of those tasks right away takes literally hundreds of hours, and is extremely expensive for the agency. To address this, correctional agencies could more tightly split up the duties of new hires and veteran staff members. If new hires had fewer initial responsibilities, or were constantly assigned to work with a veteran staff member, their initial training could be less rigorous. Then, if they have continued in their position through a probationary period, they can finish their training. This strategy has three main benefits. First, it limits the initial cost of training a new employee who is not guaranteed to stay. Second, it removes some initial responsibility from new hires, making their transition to working in the facility easier. Thirdly, it sets up an official mentoring system with new hires assigned to veterans in the facility to help them get up to speed.

Using more targeted recruitment methods rather than general job fairs could lead to more qualified applicants coming into correctional facilities. However, even if the position is not initially a good fit for them professionally, a more distinct split of duties and training required by new and veteran staff will lessen the shock of transitioning into a difficult new field.

Improved Incentives

The second primary strategy to improve retention is to increase the incentives associated with the position. The first, and most intuitive, way to do this would be to simply pay the correctional officers more. These employees will be more willing to stay at their position if the pay is not easily substituted with work in private enterprises in the area such as retail or food-service. However, any raise in pay comes with associated budgetary concerns, and correctional work already takes up an enormous slice of the budgetary pie. However, the correctional budget also includes highly variable costs for overtime for veteran employees. Paying veteran

employees overtime as they cover shifts to make up for staffing shortages is likely more expensive than giving new hires a pay increase. Furthermore, the overtime costs are extremely difficult to forecast and can lead to great financial strain within individual prisons. The upfront cost of increasing pay may be difficult to stomach, but in the long-term, it could lead to lower costs and more predictable personnel budgets.

Another financial incentive that may be effective in increasing retention is time-based bonuses. If staff know that they are going to receive a bonus after 6 months, 1 year, and 2 years on the job, they may be more likely to persevere through the difficult first days and stay in their position. Again, this strategy does require some upfront costs as prisons budget for the bonuses, but if new employees stay on at a higher rate, the cost will be well worth it.

Correctional agencies could also pursue more experimental programs to provide financial incentives for their employees. One that immediately springs to mind is assistance with student loan payments. As more and more jobs start to prefer or even require post-secondary degrees, many younger employees are taking on student loans to help cover the cost of that education. Employers can attract highly motivated and educated employees by offering benefits that directly address student loan debt. By working with loan vendors as a state agency, correctional agencies may be able to help new employees rapidly pay down their debts. This could be done either by including specific employer-sponsored student loan payment benefits within the benefit package for employees with an applicable degree (such as criminal justice, counseling, or psychology), or by allowing employees to make pre-tax payments on their student loans, similar to retirement contributions. This strategy would require more upfront work to get the student loan vendors on board, but it would be a novel benefit for employees and would help attract a more educated workforce.

Improved Work Environment

The last strategy is to improve the work environment, both for employees and in terms of public perceptions. As previously mentioned, inter-personal conflict was a high predictor of staff turnover, and understaffing caused by low retention and high turnover exacerbates the already stressful correctional environment. To improve the work environment, correctional agencies could set up clear pathways forward for leadership opportunities within the agency, reward managers who foster a collaborative working environment, and work to improve the public prestige of correctional officers by engaging in high-visibility community projects.

To begin, correctional agencies can make a more concerted effort to identify and develop future leaders within the agency. Due to the highly structured chain of command in prisons, leadership positions often go to employees that have been there the longest. Although this sometimes may correlate with good leaders, there is no guarantee that the longest-tenured employee will be an effective manager. Correctional officers surveyed in 2009 cited “Officers not knowing what their supervisors expect” and “Officers not believing that senior management understands problems faced on the job” as two of the most important factors contributing to turnover (Minor *et al* 2009, 48). Instead of strictly adhering to tenure as the primary characteristic for leaders, prisons could take identify staff who embody the qualities of good managers and proactively train them to be ready for positions of increased responsibility. This may reduce this disconnect between line workers and management and lead to reduced turnover.

Improving public perceptions of correctional work will also have positive benefits for employees. Nigro and Kellough briefly discuss this idea in *The New Public Personnel Administration* and break it down into two key sections. First, agencies should have programs in place that accurately describe the challenges, rewards, and opportunities available in the field.

Secondly, political leadership can greatly help by treating public service as a positive career option, and actually supporting those ideas with the necessary funding and resources (2014, 72).

One last strategy that could improve the work environment is to find ways to engage more directly with the public through community service type projects. If the correctional agency is sponsoring projects that improve their community, and the work is being done by correctional employees, those employees will suddenly be much more visible and admirable. It will make the work seem more prestigious, provide opportunities to give back through service projects within the community, and generally make correctional work more visible. Correctional staff perform the vast majority of their duties behind high walls, and often in rural areas where the public cannot appreciate what they do. Although it is not realistic to bring actual correctional work out into the community, correctional agencies can organize service projects for their employees. This will give them the opportunity to participate in civic activities outside of work and raise their profile in the community. Any improvements in public perception would be a non-monetary incentive for employees and could increase the prestige of correctional officers.

Conclusion

The high levels of incarceration in American mean that providing a safe and secure facility in which to rehabilitate those offenders is the number one responsibility for correctional agencies. The work required to maintain the safety and security of these facilities is difficult and necessitates extensive training for new correctional officers. This training can be costly, as most states require hundreds of hours of paid initial training for correctional officers. Unfortunately, this training does not guarantee that new employees will work in the correctional agency long enough to justify that training cost; prisons are plagued by high turnover and low retention rates among correctional officers.

Correctional agencies struggle to retain officers for a couple of key reasons. First, there are often jobs that are less stressful available in an area that pay a comparable amount. Secondly, correctional officers can feel trapped in their position, with supervisors and leadership who do not always seem to be on the same page. The position also lacks public prestige; most people respect the work that correctional officers do, but very few people ever aspire to the position.

Addressing these key causes of low retention requires major reforms to the correctional officer job and to correctional agencies on the whole. The first strategy recommends more targeted recruitment to find a labor pool that may thrive in the correctional setting. This strategy also includes modifications to training programs to hopefully judge fitness for the job before hundreds of hours of training have been invested. The second strategy recommends increased incentives for correctional officer positions. The most straightforward approach would be increased pay, but other techniques, such as bonuses or student-loan payment programs, might also greatly aid retention. The last strategy is to improve the working environment. This option likely requires the most substantive changes in order to improve leadership within correctional agencies and increase positive visibility for correctional officers in the communities they work in. However, these changes would also be more likely to last and may be less susceptible to future budget cuts or policy changes.

Correctional agencies need to find a way to recruit, train, and retain qualified officers. Correctional officers are the primary personnel in charge of inmates, who are simultaneously some of the most dangerous and most vulnerable members of society. Giving inmates the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves and keeping the public safe at the same time requires highly trained professionals, and it requires people who are committed to that mission long-term.

Targeted recruitment efforts, increased financial incentives, and an organizational commitment to an improved working environment can all work together to make the job more appealing and give correctional agencies the officers they need.

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