Ethical Issues in Corrections

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Ethical Issues in Corrections
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Abstract

Prison is not a vacation. Those that are confined are not supposed to feel like they’re in the “Happiest place on earth.” Administrators are not inclined to accommodate the extended-stay visitors (inmates) at break-neck speed. Generally, prison means punishment. Those tasked with guarding the inhabitants of penal institutions must walk a fine line, because they have mandated rules and regulations they must follow. Though, correctional officers (COs) are often viewed as underpaid adult “sitters,” on the front line, they take on the task of protecting the public day-in and day-out. Ultimately, most (if not all) of the people in prison do not want to be there; accordingly, the number one priority of most prison administrators is to keep their prepaid customers in the system. Thus, the invisible tug-o-war of CO vs. inmate is a never-ending struggle. Considering the fact that more than half a million inmates are released from prison each year in the United States (U.S.), in-house, CO-driven rehabilitation programs should be a major priority before release.¹

Introduction

The cruel and unusual punishment clause of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution restricts the severity of punishments that state and federal governments may impose upon persons who have been convicted of a criminal offense. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows slavery and/or involuntary servitude as a punishment

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, 2014
for crime after the person has been convicted. John Kleinig says incarceration is punishment enough, without the indentured servitude. Some correctional officers are accused of trying to find alternative ways to punish inmates (e.g., unnecessary strip searches; cell shake-downs; cells locked; recreation restrictions; “losing” mail; hiding and/or stealing the inmates items; “forgetting” to tell inmates about important information regarding an appointment; denying food; letting inmates out late for activities, so they don’t have enough time to complete a desired task, etc.). Guards are taught to detach from emotions, although they are in a highly emotional environment. Some guards feel like they are placed between a rock and a hard place, (e.g., if they do not enforce the rules, prison administrators will punish them). If officers enforced every single rule, the prisoners would be written-up every hour. These actions decrease morale and cooperation within the prison.

Steve Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman blogged about leasing prisoners out for work and they likened it to sweatshop labor. Correctional officers have taken on a pseudo labor-boss role within many private prisons. This brings about new issues for ethics in corrections. As if the officers hadn’t already have enough to do, now COs are also tasked with making sure prisoners get the job done. The Corrections Corporation of America and G4S (formerly Wackenhut)—two prison privatizers—lease cheap labor to Fortune 500 companies. Prisoners are told to make office furniture; work in call centers; fabricate body armor; take hotel reservations; and manufacture textiles, shoes, and clothing. Many get paid less than three dollars per day. As they were in the days of the Black Codes—right after U.S. emancipation—the prison workforce is flexible, easily maneuverable, and vulnerable to abuse. Slave prisoners helped build this country...and they are now helping many corporations build profits. After slavery, prisoners were tasked with several duties (e.g., rope and wagon-making; carpet, hat, and clothing manufacturing; coal mining; carpentry; barrel-making; shoe production; house-building; and the manufacturing of rifles). These post-war prisoners suffered appalling brutalities at the first sign of resistance (e.g., whippings, water torture, isolation, starvation, etc.). Many of them died early on into the projects, due to the working and living conditions. When the “workforce” would dwindle, labor bosses would round-up freedmen for simple offenses (e.g., vagrancy, gambling, drinking, partying, hopping a freight car, etc.) to restock the prisons. Sheriffs, local justices of the peace, state police, judges, and state governments conspired to keep the convict leasing system in business, as it was a substantial part of their income. They

\[2\] Kleinig, 2001
would sync the arrest cycle with the rise and fall of the demand for new labor. Correctional officers of today have the dubious job of being labor bosses, gatekeepers, and caretakers. That is a heavy load to tow, as they struggle to maintain compliance and order simultaneously.

Cash-strapped states are selling off prisons and prisoners as a way to cut costs and make ends meet. As reported in the *Huffington Post*, Ohio was the first state to sell one of its prisons. The Corrections Corporation of America (CCA)—the largest private prison company in the country—bought Lake Erie Correctional Institution for 72.7 million dollars to help the state balance its prison budget.\(^3\) CCA reportedly requires that each state prison agency ensure that the prisons they buy remain at least 90% full. This poses another avenue for unethical behavior within the prisons. If correctional officers are challenged with keeping the prisons “full,” they might be more malleable to corruption. With this, a bleak report for the future is in sight, as some believe the incentives to release prisoners early will disappear...and the bargaining sessions for probation will dwindle. Lobbyists will clamber for tougher get tough sentencing and longer sentences, as this will keep the money flowing for the corporations and private prisons. Correctional officers are reportedly not paid more or less, whether they choose a private prison or a publicly-funded prison.

Reportedly, the level of care for diseased and aging prisoners in private prisons is not as regulated as it is in state-run facilities. Correctional officers can be a source of checks-and-balances in this area, but this too would be another task added to their already overloaded work detail. Inevitably, taxpayers will have to pay for more prisoner law suits and correctional officers will lose their right to state pay increases and retirement packages. The safety of correctional officers might become weakened, as private prisons are guided by private regulations. In the future, taxpayers might end up footing the bill, if things don’t pan out the way they were originally proposed. Those who work in prisons, sell goods to prisons, and benefit from cheap prisoner labor have created a large and powerful lobby that prevents change.

**Prison Subculture**

The prison subculture shreds social ties with the outside world and leaves inmates with convicted criminals as their only friends.\(^4\) This is

\(^3\) Smyth, 2011
\(^4\) Gudrais, 2013
believable, as correctional officers are constantly reminded to refrain from befriending inmates. Thus, officers must practice a hair-trigger skill of modeling good behavior, while remaining behind the invisible professional line. Prisons have also become geriatric centers for an elderly population that is suffering from many age-driven diseases (e.g., heart disease, cancer, diabetes, etc.). Correctional officers must find new ways to maneuver around able-bodied and incapacitated offenders. This can pose undue stress upon COs, as they have to consider the inmate’s health and their potential to con them in trivial situations. For example, one prisoner was accused of faking his mental disorder in order to get prescription pills to sell/trade to other inmates.

Some have suggested we offshore our prison system to save money. Imagine the rules and regulations, a correctional officer would have to endure in a foreign land. Some countries don’t afford their prisoners the same rights as we do in the U.S. Some suggest prisons are merely a source of warehousing for the banished individuals of society. Correctional staff members have the dubious task of reiterating an alternative mantra. They must show prisoners what kind of life they could have once they are released. Those that have life sentences should also be given a sense of hope. It’s better all-around, if inmates have even a tissue full of hope. Officers must also show the prisoners how they can achieve their goals once released...and the pitfalls to steer clear of. They should also try to instill in them a desire to change their outside environment and those in it upon their release. There is a difference between friendliness and fairness. One can maintain a sense of professionalism, while they offer assistance. College professors do it all the time. They must help their students, and keep their personal feelings at the surface level. Sometimes, lines are blurred, but true professionals have a strong work ethic that they insist on keeping intact.

Officers spend at least eight hours per day with some of the most dangerous people on the planet. In times of enforcement, it’s tempting to break the rules in order to get the inmates to follow the rules. Many of the inmates believe they have nothing to lose, as they are serving life sentences and death sentences. High stress is rampant, as officers are faced with staff shortages, high inmate-to-guard ratios, and disobedient house guests. Imagine what the fresh-faced 18-year-old guards are thinking when an inmate cons them into breaking the rules. After an inmate turns a CO, they often threaten to blackmail them for being out of compliance. A short training session and employee manual leaves a lot to be determined and learned in the heat of the moment.
CO vs. CO

Female correction officers are considered fair game by everyone within the prison. A female working in a male prison picks up more than just prison duties when she enters the facility for her daily shift. A female officer is a known target for inmates and male COs. The first day a fresh/new female officer arrives at a male penal facility, inmates and male coworkers begin devising ways to "get" her (e.g., get her to break the rules, have sex with them, etc.). As if the inmates were not enough to be concerned about and keep in line, female COs constantly fight off sexual harassment and verbal threats from prison administrators. Many of the male COs regard the abuse as a game. And, the first CO that conquers the female officer wins the respect of the other male officers and the inmates. Soon after the female CO has been threatened or coerced into breaking the rules and having sex with a male CO, the inmates start the game all over again. They begin to devise a plan to be the first among the inmates to conquer the female officer. Now, imagine the constant pressure of having to complete the daily tasks of a correction officer, while fighting off the constant harassment of inmates trying to coerce you into a situation where they will later be able to extort and blackmail you. Many female COs are barricaded by the wall of silence that penetrates the prison facility. Female officers soon learn it's best to "see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil."

New York City Correction Commissioner Joseph Ponte was accused of blaming one of his female correction officers for the abuse she suffered at the hands of a male inmate at the Rikers Island facility. The inmate was serving time for raping a young girl. The female CO allowed the inmate to enter into a secure area in the prison during her shift. Once inside, the inmate was able to keep the female CO from leaving the secure area. He choked her and attempted to sexually assault her. In early 2015, after the incident, Commissioner Ponte fired off a letter telling officers they "must do better" and "adhere closely to basic correctional practices."

One female CO recounts the horrors of working with abusive male coworkers in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. She said her coworkers made her life "hell." She told a reporter with the New York Daily News that she was given a smartphone by her lieutenant so he could send her sexual text messages. Some have opined that female correction officers should only work in female penal facilities. Others

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5 Blau, 2015
6 Marzulli, 2013
believe that women shouldn’t work in any type of prison. Well, the same could be—and has been—said about females working as police officers. It is a dangerous job that is primarily dominated by male coworkers and male criminals. However, law enforcement agencies train, retrain and make sure officers retain constant professional development courses that reinforce their Code of Ethics. Regulations are in place that ensures protection for female officers and there are zero-tolerance guidelines in place to guard against harassment of any kind.

Sex in Prison

Susan Smith was sentenced to life in prison for murdering her children. She is currently incarcerated within the South Carolina Department of Corrections. Smith confessed to letting her car roll into a lake, while her children were still strapped in their car seats. Two prison guards have been punished for having sex with Smith.\(^7\) Authorities had been investigating a tabloid report about Smith being beaten in prison, when they uncovered the details of the sex romps between Smith and the COs. This discovery led to a broad investigation into prison misconduct in South Carolina. More than a dozen Corrections Department guards and employees were charged with having sex with inmates and/or smuggling drugs.

Correctional officers are always fighting one temptation or another.\(^8\) McConnell believes many law enforcement administrators live under the microscope, as everyone is watching to see if they will make the right decision. Women and men are offered sex and/or turned down for sex in prison. The working conditions of prison staff members are no simpler (e.g., there is potential for an inappropriate relationship between an inmate and an employee, volunteer, visitor, or agency representative). Sexual misconduct includes sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual contact, conduct of a sexual nature or implication, obscenity and unreasonable invasion of privacy, and conversations or correspondence which suggests a romantic or sexual relationship.\(^9\) When staff members exhibit sexual misconduct, it jeopardizes the security of the facility and creates stress and trauma for everyone. It also exposes the agency and staff to liability. Sex that has not been preapproved by prison officials (e.g., conjugal visits) leaves the door open for a very hostile

\(^7\) Collins, 2001
\(^8\) McConnell, 2006
\(^9\) McConnell, 2006
work environment. No viable role model tells its subjects to do as they say, not as they do. This type of behavior creates mistrust within the facility. Correctional officers must rely on each other in various treacherous situations while guarding the inmates. If an officer is having an inappropriate relationship with an inmate, he or she might slack off in other areas of behavioral enforcement. Staff sexual misconduct tremendously impacts the ability of agency officials to achieve their set goals and carry out the mission of the agency.

Congress passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) in 2003, and some states have not fully implemented the law. All federal confinement facilities should have a zero-tolerance policy for inmate sexual assault. The administrators (including those of privately-run facilities) develop standards for detecting, preventing, and punishing prison rape. They must also collect information on the incidents of sexual misconduct. Robert Winters believes the primary factors in minimizing incidents of abuse include maintaining detailed and carefully-considered prison policies, performing background checks on third parties that are active within the facility, and training everyone who will have contact with the inmates. He reminds readers that the actions of a few can damage an entire system (e.g., reducing the ability of law enforcement to deter and punish crime, deflating security/protection, degrading conditions within the system, deterring public support, litigation, and losing valuable funding). According to a report by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) on the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), officers have been accused of several heinously unethical acts throughout the years (e.g., some have abandoned their posts in order to have sex with inmates; some have altered prison records in favor of inmates with whom they were involved; some have released inmates from their cells at unauthorized times; etc.). This behavior gears the officers up for more unethical violations, as it is a foreshadowing of the manipulation to come from inmates who received favors earlier. To combat sexual misconduct, prison officials must implement regular, mandatory, ongoing training sessions and workshops that impart techniques on how to avoid getting trapped in the temptations of sexual misconduct. Officials should also provide a secure "whistleblowing" system. When an investigation is conducted, it must be fair and thorough in addressing allegations of misconduct. The ethical training standards need to be strengthened and monitored at all facilities (federal, state, and local).
According to a 2001 Human Rights Watch report, state prison officials believe rape within their facilities is rare. Sexual acts within the prisons are thought to be "consensual," even though it's against the rules. Many correctional officers are accused of "blowing off" allegations of rape, and attributing the alleged crimes to the inmate's sexuality. The low numbers of rapes reported by prison officials are in stark contrast to the higher prevalence found in academic surveys of inmate victimization. Correctional staff at the supervisory level gave lower estimates of the frequency of abuse, while inmates themselves gave much higher estimates. Once inmates arrive to their assigned prisons, a figurative target is placed on their backs. Prison is the first place many offenders ever experience the horror of being a victim. As such, some view prison as a criminal act within itself (e.g., because of the potential for forced sodomy, fellatio, and oral and anal intercourse). The inmates reveal that this type of abuse all depends on the level of attention the matter is given by correctional staff. Some officers do not see the abuse as a problem. The Human Rights Watch reports that prison officials don't do enough to stymie the sexual aggression and abuse.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) provides specialized training to correctional staff on the issue of inmate-on-inmate abuse. High-profile law suits have helped correctional authorities take the problem of custodial sexual assault more seriously. Correctional officers should be required to collect data on incidents of sexual aggression and develop and implement more specific employee trainings on the topic. Prison administrators should evaluate and classify each inmate upon entry and assess a risk analysis for each offender that details their potential to be a victim of sexual assault or a perpetrator. NIC rules on classification and housing are particularly valuable. They provide that all prisoners must be evaluated and classified according to their risk of being either the victim or the perpetrator of sexually assaultive behavior. These classifications are to be taken into account when making housing assignments. In particular, inmates deemed vulnerable to assault are barred from being housed in the same cell or in small dormitories with inmates rated as potential perpetrators. However, overcrowding issues have thwarted the idea of forming a redeemable classification system within many prisons and jails. Inmates are frequently placed with more violent criminals that pose more a threat. Correctional staff must monitor areas that are considered high-risk for sexual assault.

Staff shortages often prevent adequate patrolling, ultimately leaving the safety of the inmates to chance. Prisoners have told Human Rights Watch, they are often left alone and unsupervised in their housing areas, even though correctional officers are supposed to patrol the areas every
fifteen minutes. The guards that hang in there, and refuse to quit, are most definitely not jumping at the chance to take on more duties, because prison officials haven’t hired enough staff members. More inmates and fewer guards equal more chances for corruption. Correctional officers must respond swiftly to complaints of sexual assault (e.g., protecting the safety of the complainant, seeking medical help as needed, and investigating the alleged offense). Correctional staff members are responsible for protecting prisoners from violence. Prisoners are not paid to protect themselves. Rape on the inside is handled quite differently from rape on the outside. Consequently, rape in prison is a crime the perpetrator can commit with minimal fear of being punished. Law enforcement officials rely on correctional authorities to gather the proof of a crime and report it for prosecution.

Youth in Lockup

Correctional officers must remember that prisoners are people too. One mistake should not equate to a life-long weeding-out process. Correctional officers hold a degree of power over inmates that might only be considered comparable to 16th century slavery. In a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." This is especially true when discussing youth in adult criminal facilities.

Some youth are sentenced in adult courts, found guilty, and transported to adult prisons. They are sectioned off from the offenders that are 18 and over, but they live in violent facilities with adult offenders. Correctional officers have a duty to address the youthful offenders differently. They must follow the Code of Ethics, but there are different levels of enforcement involving juveniles. Although, the youth that are processed in the adult system are deemed to be some of the most violent, they are still quite vulnerable. While interviewing a young Texas inmate, he told me he had to “fight” every day in prison. The young male was incarcerated after he murdered an elderly woman and left the weapon protruding from her face. He is in the Special Treatment Program (COURAGE) at the Clemens Unit. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) houses many of their most violent youth at this correctional institution. The guards have relayed to me that the youth do have to fight for their lives in some of the facilities. Correctional officers have to spend extra time incorporating the youth into their new structure.
Many of the youthful offenders are gang members. When they arrive at the prisons, they link up with familiar faces and family members. These young men and women have the most exceptional treatment needs within the facility. Correctional officers must model the potential behavior they seek from the youngsters...similar to a parent-child relationship. Youth are more susceptible to abuse and neglect in prison. Ironically, before entering prison, many of them were neglected and sent to foster homes after being abused by their parents and guardians. Correctional officers must be tough, but fair. They should not be afraid to act as a nurturer, as many of the youth respond better to adults that show compassion and care. The 16-year-old I interviewed was sentenced to 40 years in prison. He has to undergo daily counseling sessions and cognitive therapy. Others I interviewed are on heavy medication for mental incapacities. The guards, nurses, teachers, doctors, and clergymen must work in concert to rehabilitate and service the detained youth.

Youth are undoubtedly more temperamental than adults, thus correctional officers will have to grin and bear quite a few fortuitous moments. They must be able to see the bigger picture and know that it’s better for everyone if they show a little more compassion. Youth have to be taught all of the skills that many of the adults learned before they were locked up. Coping skills are in high demand, as many of the youth are faced with situations they would have never encountered if they were not imprisoned. On the other hand, some youth are quite wise for their age, and they have the ability to spoil the whole barrel. Correctional officers must be vigilant in their patrol, and eager to stay abreast of everything going on within their units. For example, if a youth was expecting a visit from one of his family members, but he got caught fighting, he might be denied that visitation window. This could set off an explosive situation for the officers, as it might cause the youth to lose the little bit of hope he was holding on to (e.g., causing a potentially suicidal situation).

One of the other youth I interviewed (a 17-year-old) told me his mother had just written him a goodbye letter. His mother told him she could not handle the fact that he was in prison. He was all she had, before he got locked up. She told him that she was getting ready to commit suicide, and that was her last letter to him. He was devastated. He cried during the interview and told me he had been irritable and fighting with everyone, after receiving her goodbye letter. Correctional officers must be able to key in on situations like this, and try to thwart the potential for death and violence among the youth. Officers should undergo daily role-play, situational modeling, and critical thinking scenarios to develop proactive solutions to potential problems. The games some officers play with the adults could cost a youth his life (e.g.,
withholding mail, visitation, and meals). The juvenile sex offenders are sometimes housed in special units, as they tend to get into more trouble than others, for various reasons. Correctional officers must be trained to deal with this special group, as their rehabilitative therapy can be quite intense.

Officers must resist the temptation to treat the youth as their own children (e.g., bringing them candy, gum, sodas, snacks, etc.). Just as the adults use those instances for blackmail, the youth can too. Guards must make sure the youth attend school and behave in school. They must take them to their doctors’ appointments and make sure they don’t attack their doctors. They must take them to treatment and make sure they don’t attack their group members. They must take them to breakfast, lunch and dinner and make sure they don’t start a food fight. It takes a special kind of correctional officer to guard the youth, and make a difference too.

### Drugs in Prison

In a 2013 report, the OIG said it had begun assessing the implementation and effectiveness of the Bureau of Prison’s employee search policies. The evaluations were done in an effort to stop contraband and weapons from entering the facilities. According to a 2003 report by the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, drug trafficking is growing astronomically within U.S. jail and prison systems. Correctional officers are being identified as the bad men in this growing phenomenon. Some inmates are receiving the drugs through family members and friends during their visits (e.g., passed to inmates through soda cans, babies’ diapers, and kisses).

Gangs are reportedly driving the drug game in prison. Many inmates were gang members before they were incarcerated, so it’s really business as usual when they are asked to continue the process of trafficking drugs. Drug king pens—in prison and out of prison—look for gullible, vulnerable individuals that will help their business succeed. This includes correctional officers, administrators, staff, inmates, and other persons involved with the prison (e.g. vendors). Drugs have been a problem for correctional professionals for decades. If correctional officers are not importing and exporting illegal drugs within the prison system, why is it that they cannot halt the flow and use of drugs on their premises? A lack of pay could be one answer. Underpaid COs might be more vulnerable to corruption. Some officers are paid as little as $8.00 per hour. Imagine the additional earnings potential they could garner by bringing in a few bundles of cocaine, marijuana, and heroin every day. Because of this,
administrators must enforce changes in prison security procedures. All correctional personnel should undergo and conduct "pat down" searches of all visitors and utilize drug-sniffing dogs for each item the visitors and officers bring in. Prison administrators should also purchase more surveillance cameras and other technological equipment to detect drugs and drug paraphernalia.

Reportedly, one jailer received a $40.00 "delivery fee" to smuggle cigarettes and a lighter into a Tarrant County Jail.\(^{12}\) The jailer was reportedly desperate for extra money to make ends meet. Some are calling for tighter security stipulations for all contract workers in services like commissary, food, education, and medical services (nearly 500 people). The Special Prosecution Unit reportedly prosecuted approximately 280 contraband cases involving cellphones, drugs, and tobacco. Smuggling a cellphone into Death Row can net an officer up to $2,200. Cell phones are in such high demand, that the price for smuggling them can often exceed that of sneaking in drugs. Knives, drugs, cell phones, smokeless tobacco, and even McDonald’s hamburgers have been smuggled into prisons by guards and correctional employees.\(^{13}\) Many of the smugglers in some instances don’t get fired for the felonious acts. Of the 263 employees disciplined solely for contraband, 26 received no punishment at all. While contraband has been a problem for years, the issue received little attention until Senator John Whitmire, a Democrat from Houston, received several threatening calls from a death row inmate using a smuggled cell phone. Whitmire believes staffing shortages have forced prison administrators to compromise in both discipline and hiring practices. And the low pay they receive makes them more susceptible to being pulled into the crime rings.

Texas Senator John Whitmire says prison administrators should continue to drug test prison officials. He believes it will assist in removing contraband from Texas prisons. The random urine drug testing, applies to approximately 26,000 correctional officers. Employees who test positive face administrative sanctions including termination.\(^{14}\) Some inmates are creating drug and money-laundering rackets with the help of guards and family members.\(^{15}\) Investigators discovered the organized crime ring after listening to phone calls made by several convicts at a Texas prison. They also seized their ingoing and outgoing mail. The inmates would arrange for their family members to deposit money into

\(^{12}\) Boyd, 2009
\(^{13}\) Sandberg and Stiles, 2009
\(^{14}\) Turner, 2012
\(^{15}\) Ward, 2010
other inmate’s accounts, and the arranging inmate would get a 25 percent cut for the transaction. Investigators believe the convicts were receiving assistance from a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) employee. Prison officials have seized thousands of smuggled cell phones, drugs, alcohol, weapons, and cash from convicts and from prison guards.

Rules in Prison

Most prison officials abide by the conduct that is prescribed within the Code of Ethics adopted by the American Correctional Association (ACA), a national organization for correctional employees. Members agree to display honesty, respect and a commitment to professionalism in their work. Corrections professionals have a very stressful job that is not the most sought after or the most appealing. Still, they must respect the civil and legal rights of all people, and refrain from any form of discrimination, including racial, gender, religious or national origin. And, they must never use their positions for personal gain. Correctional officers should report corruption and unethical behavior to the proper authorities and maintain a sense of confidentiality. Above all, they should protect the public from criminals and protect the criminals from the criminals. Correctional officers should maintain a sense of fairness and consistency. Many officers are cut from the same cloth, as the people they guard. Thus, the temptation to violate the Code of Ethics is not far-fetched. Officers have to lay their prejudices aside and resist the temptation to identify with the family (gang members) they once championed for. They can’t be too strict and they can’t be too friendly.

The rules must be enforced, but there is a fine line in this walk. Handing out “write-ups” like candy won’t cause the prisoners to be more cooperative. They must allow some non-violent activities to ride/go unnoticed (e.g., gambling, horseplay, tattooing, etc.). Officers must realize that the slightest infractions are what keep some prisoners sane. Whatever persona they choose, guards should maintain consistency. If the officer is going to be the chief enforcer with some, he or she should maintain that consistency with all, and not show favoritism. A lack of consistency in enforcing behavioral outcomes causes chaos, no matter where you are, including public schools. If a teacher, boss, or parent shows favoritism to one person or group over another, it brings down morale and leaves the door open for future turmoil.

Correctional officers must have thick skin and refrain from taking things personally. Everyone has a bad day, every now and then, but
prisoners are more prone to several consistent bad days. If a teacher has an argument with her loved one, she must still show up for work and act like nothing happened. It’s the same thing with correctional officers. No matter what they’re going through in their personal lives, they cannot bring that into the prison, as the pressure is already high in there. The inmates do not have very many outlets, so if they’re having a bad day—which could understandably be every day—correctional staff members must be able to recognize the situation, prevent an unnecessary occurrence, and deescalate the triggers.

Sometimes inmates present themselves in a friendly manner. Guards must be able to distinguish between keeping the peace and getting too personal with an inmate. Prisoners and correctional officers should never be friends, as the friendship could cost them their job and/or life. Remember, friends expect things from friends. The last thing you want is an inmate who believes you owe him or her something. Indeed, the job of a correctional officer is tricky and complicated. It’s hard to see the inmates, as those on the outside see them, but it’s also easy to get caught up with people you spend most of your day with. Some guards seek out ways to use prisoners for their own benefit (reciprocity). If one inmate is continuously reaping havoc, an unethical guard might use another inmate to seek revenge and show the troublemaker a lesson.

Union correctional officers in Massachusetts once published their own set of rules for guards to follow:

1. Thou shall not “rat” on a fellow employee
2. Thou shall not place thy faith in management
3. Thou shall not surrender thyself to management
4. Thou shall not bear witness against one another

Any officer who violated the unofficial commandments was subject to punitive hearings and could have been thrown out of the union.\(^{16}\)

A lack of integrity in correctional officers shows prisoners they don’t have to follow the rules. Officers show a lapse in ethical judgment when their behavior does not match the rules or the laws of the facility. This leads to a lack of good moral order behind prison walls. When administrators and staff allow injustices to stand, they reinforce bad behavior, which can lead to an increase in violence within the prison. There is a definite code of silence within the prison system, but it must be demolished in the interest of maintaining safe, secure prisons. All corrections professionals—from the front line to the front office—must

\(^{16}\) Dennehy and Nantel, 2006
demonstrate self-discipline, a concern for public safety, respect for the
rights of inmates in their custody, and a respect for and adherence to
statutes and departmental policy.\textsuperscript{17}

Corrections officials must continually seek the best practices and not
just recycle the practices of the past. Daily, officers are tasked with
applying their experience and intelligence to suit the situation, utilizing
their training and education, calling upon their common sense and good
judgment, and displaying their integrity and respect for others. Two
veterans of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, Kathleen
Dennedy and Kelly Nantel, believe the safety of the prison staff and the
inmates in custody should be the highest priority of any correctional
administrator. Correctional officers perform a critical public safety
function under challenging and potentially dangerous circumstances.
Dennedy and Nantel believe corrections staff have a tendency to see
things through an “us” (e.g., administrators, guards, officers, treatment
staff) vs. “them” lens. What happens in the house stays in the house.
Correctional officers must be role models of positive behavior. If they do
not follow the rules, they can forget about enforcing them. Inmates need
to see correctional officers being punished for breaking the rules.
Consequences for bad behavior must be modeled to all who work within
the prison system. Prison culture affects the employees’ interactions with
each other, which could lead to a prison subculture and an undeniable
code of silence. This culture also affects how the employees interact with
the inmates. The culture dictates whether or not employees will carry out
the agency’s goals and mission.

Prison is a small town, where the inmates are the citizens. The
citizens/inmates must be kept safe and secure at all times, no matter what
brought them to the town.\textsuperscript{18} Their housing, medical, educational,
religious, and mental health needs must meet national standards.
Correctional officers cannot deny the offenders their right to
nutritional food. Finally, officers must encourage the use of program
opportunities that facilitate the successful reentry of inmates back into
their respective communities. The corrections field is the most rapidly
growing public-sector function in government, as the number of
offenders keeps growing. Accordingly, the number of staff required to
facilitate prison functions are in demand. Correctional officers must
undergo physical standards tests to ensure that they can meet the physical
requirements of their jobs. Their psychological well-being is also tested
during a pre-screening hiring window. Many of the basic training

\textsuperscript{17} Dennedy and Nantel, 2006
\textsuperscript{18} Dennedy and Nantel, 2006
programs last about nine weeks and are designed to focus on building communication skills and real prison scenarios.

Cultural issues must also be addressed, as many come in with preconceived notions and bias. It is hoped that new correctional officers reenergize the old guards, instead of the veterans making the new hires as cynical as they have become. Correctional officers are constantly reminded to aim towards the end goals as well: reducing recidivism and successful prisoner reentry. Correctional officers are held to the highest standards of conduct. They establish a culture of accountability, fairness, and moral order and act in accordance with ideals of ethics and professionalism. Correctional officers must establish clear boundaries and not become too friendly with the inmates, as they could potentially be called a “con-lover,” or be seen as an easy mark.

Correctional officers know they are protecting some of the most hated people in the world and many of them view the inmates as less than human or as disposable property. However, this causes many officers to miss the change in an inmate’s behavior, which might reduce their ability to sense when there is danger ahead. None of the officers want to be seen as if they are over-identifying with the offenders. Officers must have the appropriate temperament, the necessary communication skills and a full understanding of what works in the correctional environment. There is tremendous peer pressure to go along to get along within the prison system. In any institution there are both formal and informal organizational charts, where there are leaders by title and informal/unofficial leaders. Each leader, along with his leadership style, drives the culture of a given shift, division, and facility.

If there is a subculture with a code of silence, the code is often enforced through intimidation tactics (e.g., verbal threats against personal safety and vandalism of personal property). Administrators must maintain integrity, while conducting investigations of unethical behavior. Correctional officers and inmates must believe the system is fair and they must also have confidence in the investigative process. Inmates need to see that there are consequences for bad behavior. Prosecution must be handed down swiftly for infractions.

Technology helps to break the monotony of the code of silence as well. When staff and inmates know cameras are monitoring and recording their every move, they tend to behave differently. The goals of corrections are deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and punishment. Offenders are sentenced to prison as punishment, not for punishment.

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19 Dennehy and Nantel, 2006
20 Dennehy and Nantel, 2006
Correctional administrators must be aware of potential “stressors” that can foreshadow other problems. For true reform, correctional administrators could launch a public information campaign, where internal and external players are continuously updated on the rules and changes within the agency.

The Texas Tribune reported that high staff turnover and poorly trained correctional officers caused an increase in roughness and inappropriate behavior with the inmates. It is believed that rookie officers lack de-escalation skills in confrontational situations. According to a report by the Emergency Action Center within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, there has been a rise in the number of “major use of force” incidents (e.g., use of chemical agents, like pepper spray). Union officials have blamed the increased incidents of force on the extreme heat, as Texas prisons are not air conditioned.\(^{21}\) The *Houston Chronicle* reports that the Harris County Sheriff’s Office fired two jailers and one deputy after a 72-year-old male inmate was knocked unconscious and left without aid.\(^{22}\) Medical examiners said the inmate died from complications of a heart attack after suffering blunt head trauma and a broken nose. The detention officer, who hit the inmate, was cleared of any wrongdoing by a Harris County grand jury.

**Conclusion**

Correctional officers, like law enforcement officers, are hired to carry out a debt to society—uphold public safety. Almost anything is possible. Prison administrators must prepare incoming officers for the toils and snares that await them. All it takes is one cynical, corrupt guard to change a fresh, malleable mind. Some correctional officers have to be taught instinct, as they are not always keen at trusting their *gut* intuition in critical situations. They must rely heavily on the policies and procedures set before them. When in doubt, they must read it out—not guess it out. Officers must maintain a professional demeanor, even when the coast is clear and the environment appears to be more lax. Veteran officers know how easy it is to forgo professionalism and allow pride, anger, and revenge to flourish. Officers are tasked with keeping the inmates within their unit in line, drug free, and orderly. It is a true talent, when one is able to foresee and deescalate a violent situation. Many would rather take the easy way out and use violence to combat violence.

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\(^{21}\) Langford, 2014
\(^{22}\) Pinkerton, 2012
Correctional officers must refrain from making promises they cannot keep, as this can cause inappropriate relationships and situations to form. It also makes it harder for the other guards who are following the rules. Inmates have an enormous amount of time to study and develop new ways to get guards caught up in situations that could get them fired and/or hurt. Some inmates view it as a victory of sorts to get a guard fired and/or prosecuted for a crime. As the old saying goes, misery loves company. Correctional officers must think two steps ahead of the inmate and practice potential scenarios with their colleagues (e.g., role play). Guards are sometimes the only models of good behavior an inmate has ever encountered. They have a duty to exhibit the utmost professionalism and consistency. If a guard gives an inmate an inch of rope, the inmate will find a way to watch him hang himself with that same rope. Correctional officers should consistently follow the rules, exhibit fairness, stay consistent, and follow the prescribed Code of Ethics.

References


