Unlocking Correctional Stress: An overview of the Gaol Keepers’ Stress

Manbir Kohli

Manbir Kohli is a Senior Correctional Officer at Parklea Correctional Centre NSW

Abstract:
Stress has major financial and human implications across businesses and organisations. Stress in workers in correctional institutions may be under reported due to the ‘machismo’ attitudes displayed by prison officers charged with the, seemingly, conflicting roles of containment and care. Often the symptoms are either denied or ignored by people working in prisons due to the ‘emotional labour’ and ‘face work’ masqueraded by them.

Major stressors that corrections officers face are environmental safety, violence, role conflict and ambiguity, emotional flashpoints, boredom etcetera.

This paper looks at some research done on the subject and draws suggestions on what the administrators of prisons can do to alleviate the issue of stress.

Stress and work:
From families, sports teams, criminal gangs, charities to multinational corporations engaged in cut throat competitive activities every organisation while offering its’ members a sense of belonging, money, fame or notoriety is also responsible for inflicting stress as an important and inescapable by product. How various individuals deal with this stress can decide the length of stay they may have with the organisation and what growth paths they will adopt.

What is stress?
Stress has two dimensions, stimuli and responses as defined by Matteson & Ivancevich. (Paoline, Lambert & Hogan 2006 p. 184)

Stressors, explain Cullen et al (ibid. p. 184) are stimuli that cause stress and are environmental conditions that place ‘excessive/unusual demands on a person and are capable of engendering psychological discomfort.’ The response we generate towards these stressors is called job stress and can have short or long term implications including physiological, psychological and emotional, as defined by Matteson & Ivancevich. (ibid. p. 184)

Effects of stress:
Merllie & Paoli in 2001 work stated that in a survey of occupational stress of 16,000 European workers, nearly 30 % of workers reported work activities as the main cause of their health problems. (Caulfield et al 2004 p 163) However the emotional impact on families can be devastating and hence it is important that correctional administrators identify, target and eliminate stressors.

Cheek & Miller (Paoline, Lambert & Hogan 2006 p.183) have identified job related stress as a culprit and is implicated in serious negative consequences such as health problems, illness both mental and physical, social problems, decreased work performance and even death. It has also been seen that acutely stressed officers do not treat inmates and fellow officers in a professional, courteous or polite manner. (ibid. p. 183)

Stress and corrections:
Corrections is no different from any other organisation, however due to the different nature of its core business of providing custody and care facilities for people with various criminogenic, personal, emotional, mental and physical needs the environmental stressors are unique and challenging. Brough. P and Williams. J of Griffith University in their paper “Managing Occupational Stress in a High-Risk Industry” say, “The occupation of correctional officers has received scant attention, contributing to a recent increase in formal stress claims”. (Brough & Williams 2007, p. 555)

Research has also demonstrated “...that correctional work is a stressful occupation”. (Morgan & Van Haveren & Pearson 2002, p.146) In a study by Lindquist and Whitehead in 1986 (ibid. p.146) it was concluded that 68
% correctional officers found their work moderately stressful while 33% reported symptoms of burnout.

Cheek & Miller (Paoline, Lambert & Hogan 2006 p.183) found that in corrections setting the problems are exacerbated because "...correctional officers have a higher than expected likelihood of hypertension, heart attacks, ulcers and other stress-related illnesses." It further confirms that "...correctional officers die far sooner than average and that stress is the leading reason for the shortened life expectancy." (ibid. p. 183)

With such dire negative consequences both for the officers and corrections it is surprising that there is a paucity of such research in Australia. Upon perusal of some of the available work done in Australia, UK, Canada and USA some findings are as below.

**Violent settings:**

Prisons are violent, unpredictable and frustrating places. Inmates have access to many programs to cope with this environment but officers due to their own volition or peer-pressure indulge in displays of machismo attitudes. Machismo attitudes as defined by Cheek & Miller (Armstrong & Griffin 2004 p. 588) is a belief that the essential skills needed for the job of a correctional officer includes such 'masculine' traits as physical prowess and a willingness to use force.

Tragically these machismo attitudes become a hurdle in the way of prison officer's ability to ask for help during times of stress. Researchers such as Cheek & Miller (ibid. p 588) have concluded that there is an underreporting of stress by correctional officers due to the 'machismo' attitudes that they develop. Encouraging corrections officers to seek assistance for stress can bring in a culture of people who do not deny their feelings and may continue to have good mental health.

Crouch 1985, Jurik 1985, and Wright & Saylor 1991 (ibid. p. 588) have found that male officers were more likely than female officers to describe their job as highly dangerous believing more so than their female co-workers that assaults were likely to occur and that inmates were likely to use force against staff.

The literature is replete with several factors that contribute to stress in a correctional officer's work life. There have been many inconsistent findings however some patterns do emerge due to stress caused due to shift work, negative image of the profession in the community, danger of working with often dangerous and violent people, understaffing, working overtime, role conflict and ambiguity, machismo attitudes and others. While the lists of stressors are many and varied some common ones are examined in some detail as below.

**Gender:** Using gender as a basis for determining generation of stress has provided conflicting results. Female officers have been found to suffer higher stress levels than their male counterparts in studies done by some researchers including Cullen et al. (1985) (Morgan & Van Haveren & Pearson 2002, p.153) while other studies, for instance Triplett et al (ibid p. 153) have contradicted this or only found marginal differences.

In studies done by Gross, Larson, Urban & Zupan, 1994 (ibid. p. 153) it has been seen that females were less likely than male officers to respond to inmates with a lack of concern or impersonally.

One possible explanation for the conflicting result could be attributed to the timing of such research. Results showing higher female officer stress were mainly conducted in the 1980s while the ones unable to find any direct correlation between gender and stress have been done in the 1990s. It is possible that due to the nascent nature of women in corrections and the time gap between the studies, women have made successful attempts to adjust to corrections work. Van Voorhis et al 1991 (ibid. p. 154) in a study has concluded that females are able to access more peer and
supervisory support than male officers which helps them adjust to their challenging work environment.

It has also been suggested by researchers that the earlier studies “…were due in part to manifestations of male hostility in a ‘masculinized’ environment that created a more stressful work environment for females (Armstrong & Griffin 2004 p.581). Males viewed females as unreliable should an emergency arise which might have resulted in sexual harassment, poorly developed social networks. (ibid. p.581)

Race: Similar arguments as those of gender and stress may apply to the race of an officer and stress. Studies of officer race in the correctional environment became of interest in the ‘60s and ‘70s due to an increase in the number of racial minorities in prisons as suggested by Van Hooris et al., 1991(ibid. p. 581)

There have been inconsistencies in the results between the race and stress levels as some studies found that there was “…increased likelihood of minorities to experience job-related discrimination, thus leading to greater job stress.” (ibid. p.581) while others, like Blau et al., 1986 (ibid. p.581) found “Caucasian officers reported higher stress levels.” Minorities, like women in the earlier stages of their introduction to corrections, may also find a lack of social networks which might compound the stress due to discrimination they may suffer at their work place.

Age, education: also throws up inconsistencies. Some researchers, Lindquist & Whitehead 1986 (Morgan & Van Haveren & Pearson 2002, p 154) have found that younger officers experience greater levels of occupational stress and burnout whereas like Triplett et al., 1996 (ibid. p. 154) others found no such age effects. They found that ‘…cadets and older officers with more education were more likely to experience a sense of personal accomplishment but did not experience increased levels of depersonalization or emotional exhaustion.’ Older officers are able to tap into peer support and hence may have lower levels of stress than younger officers. On the question of education it has been seen ‘…encouraging officers to continue their education may increase their sense of personal accomplishment, which might also result in concurrent improvements in their job performance.’ (ibid. p.155) Education serves the purpose of broadening a person’s vision and helps them put their role into a larger context.

Rank of officers: Paoline & Lambert & Hogan (2006) have concluded that supervisors generally reported higher levels of job satisfaction than non supervisory staff. A sense of accomplishment could be attributed to supervisors as they contribute to the overall ‘management’ of their area and make a difference to their staff’s work lives and well being. Supervisors have access to the decision making process and are not usually locked into a “key turner” role.

Prisons as emotional areas: Prisons are places where there is a lot of physical and emotional contact between inmates and officers. Wherever human beings spend protracted periods of time together in intimate settings “…they are drawn into emotional engagement with each other.” (Crawley 2004 p.130)

The emotional content of prisons is overwhelming as these are places where people are held captive against their will, where routine everyday events and people are absent from their lives. These and other reasons lead to staff-prisoner interactions and relationships that are emotionally charged. Officers feel “…they are fearful of certain prisoners…” (ibid. p.131) While officers may find it easy to deal with the anger issues of prisoners many feel they are “…ill equipped to deal with emotions that require a tender and patient response.” (ibid. p.132)

Officers have to constantly manage the emotions of not only inmates but also manage the emotions that prison generates within them. As explained by Hochschild in her book The Managed
Heart, (ibid. p.47) the ways in which people manage their emotions while at work is called ‘emotional labour’ which is to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Correctional officers are masters of this and “…prison officers are acutely aware that they must play parts and stage-manage their actions if they are to control the impressions they convey to prisoners and, just as importantly, to fellow staff.” This “face work” (ibid. p.140) for impression management for both other officers and inmates is a continuous role play and can be very stressful.

Such intense management of emotions in inmates and themselves can lead to acute stress in prison officers. Crawley (2004 p. 133) explains that there are not many personal disclosures of stress but a large number of interviewees during her research acknowledge that their jobs were extremely stressful.

Dangerousness or environmental safety: has been associated with job stress in many studies among correctional staff as they are concerned about the lack of personal safety due to the inherent violent nature of prisons. Using U.S Department of Justice (2000) figures Armstrong & Griffin (2004 p.579) explain “…except for police officers, the number of workplace non-fatal violent incidents is higher per 1,000 employees for correctional officers than for any other profession, including taxi drivers, convenience store staff, mental health workers, and teachers.”

Correctional officers anticipate a constant threat of violence from those they supervise which leads to increased stress. Safety concerns were a recurrent theme in various studies on correctional officer stress.

Dembo and Dertke (ibid. p.580) found that safety issues related to “disorder among inmates, the threat of violence against staff by inmates, the threat of violence among inmates by staff, and the relative inability of staff to retaliate vis-à-vis inmates.”

Morgan, Van Haveren & Pearson (2002 p.155) have concluded that quality of inmate contact can be related to officer stress, “…as the potential for violence and difficulty dealing with certain inmate problems appear to be contributing factors.” Also “…negative inmate contact led to increased correctional officer burnout, whereas positive direct contact led to increased feelings of personal accomplishment.” (ibid. p.156) Increasing positive inmate-officer contacts can lead to reduced job stress, and this requires an understanding of policies and procedures, the psyche of incarcerated individuals, and focus on adopting a professional approach by officers and increased programs for inmates.

Interestingly officers working in areas considered dangerous such as cafeteria, living areas do not experience higher levels of occupational burnout than officers working in areas considered less dangerous for instance perimeter patrol, tower duties. While certain studies have shown increased stress in maximum security prisons, Morgan et al (2002 p. 155) did not find it so.

Bowker (as cited in Armstrong & Griffin 2004 p.580) reported higher rates of correctional officer illness existed in maximum-security prisons in Australia as compared to minimum security prisons, indicating a higher level of stress with higher security levels.

Role conflict and role ambiguity: have also been included in the list of correctional officer’s stressors list and understandably have been implicated with playing a major role in making corrections a difficult place to work in.

Role conflict occurs when correctional staff, as explained by Finn, (Paoline, Lambert & Hogan 2006, p.185) is required to “…balance the
two competing and conflicting functions of custody and treatment.” On the one hand prison officers have the role of ‘custody’, of people who do not want to be there, to undertake and on the other they are expected to behave in a humane and professional manner. This constant juggling of conflicting and often emotive roles provides incessant stress to officers. It is a tight rope act which must be performed due to the sensitive and public nature of treatment of prisoners in recent times. Correctional officers constantly feel they may be inculpated in case they are seen to fall on either side by administration or fellow officers.

Role ambiguity occurs when there is a huge element of uncertainty or lack of information in carrying out their already conflicting roles. Most employees need clear direction in how they can do their tasks better, and if their supervisors are unable to give them clear actions and goals they may feel psychologically stressed. Finn says (ibid. p. 185) “This is the case for many correctional staff as they sometimes receive directions and orders that are unclear or contradictory.” In prisons there are often situations where reality can be interpreted differently to the policies and procedures that are set out. How these policies and procedures are interpreted often leads to ambiguity for frontline staff in the carrying out of tasks. It is not uncommon for staff to feel lost and confused when there is a change in guard either at supervisor or management level, as each one grapples with interpretations.

A combination of role conflict and ambiguity is called “role stress or role problem” (ibid. p.185) and is a constant source of stress for corrections officers.

What can be done?:
In this present time of rising inmate numbers, costs, public scrutiny over efficiency, privatisation there is continuous pressure on correctional administration to keep staff motivated and productive.

While there is no panacea for the removal of stress in corrections officers, we can attempt to look at some leads offered by researchers. While aspects of environmental safety, security can be dealt by experts in those fields, I will attempt to sum up some work done in the human aspects of corrections and outline common strategies that can be used.

Job Demands-Control-Support: Many solutions have been offered by psychologists researching stress at the work place. The JDCS (Job Demands-Control-Support) model proposed by Johnson & Hall,(Brough & Williams 2007 p.556) was tested in an Australian correctional centre and confirmed that officers who experienced high job demands and also had low job control along with low social support (supervisors, coworkers, and family, friends) (ibid. p.559) experienced high stress levels.

In involving families so that they are able to see, understand and appreciate the work done in prisons can help alleviate the stress prison officers undergo. This helps officers debrief their work day with people they trust and who can understand and not judge or negate their feelings. Correctional administrators through various activities for families can help them feel part of an extended professional family and multiply the social support each officer gets.

Supervision quality: Task oriented supervisors sometimes forget that their team members are human beings who need validation, understanding and exploration of their feelings. Supervisors who provide social support to their team members can help them cope with the stresses of their job demands by taking away the additional challenges that people face. In their study Brough & Williams (2007 p.562) have confirmed that officers who received high levels of supervisor support have higher levels of job satisfaction compared to low levels of support. It has been suggested by Brough & Frame (2004); Brough & Pears (2004) (ibid. p. 565) that organisational stress experienced by correctional officers can be reduced by appropriate training in supportive supervision. If a supervisor is available to listen to an officer’s personal problems, as well as receptive to work specific issues there is a decrease in stress felt by that officer.
Relations with coworkers: Paoline, Lambert & Hogan (2006 p.198) have confirmed through their research that positive relations with co-workers decreases job stress within correctional institutions. Corrections need to undertake team building; social activities for officers so that there is an increased understanding among them which lead to reduced stress.

Staff needs to be made aware that positive interaction is not only good for their mental wellbeing but also improves safety of all. "Negative behavior between coworkers must not be tolerated, and more important, backstabbing behavior by a correctional staff member toward a fellow employee must never be rewarded." (ibid. p. 200) The administration must provide effective inputs in ensuring that staff are valued and also value each other as team members. This can be a challenge at all times, thereby making its implementation imperative.

Team building:"… training programs and group events/activities will take time and money; they are not cost free. Correctional administrators must convince the funding body of why it is important to finance these programs." (ibid. p 201) Administrators need to do a careful Cost versus, at most time's intangible, Benefits analysis and look at long term advantages through improved productivity, commitment, reduced retraining expenses, reduction in quality issues.

Conflict resolution skill training needs to be made available for staff to resolve issues locally without these permitted to fester over prolonged times.

Policies and procedures: Policies are important as they are guidelines for employees on how to do their jobs and set the rules for interaction with inmates. Constant friction between officers is caused by lack of clarity of policies or inconsistent application of them. This friction can lead to stress.

Correctional administration must ensure policies and procedures are easily accessible to all and 'position' them as a tool for a more safe, humane and secure correctional centre. The idea of "instrumental communication" (ibid. p.200) which is the "degree to which information about the job is formally transmitted by an organisation to its members" is a valuable one.

Instrumental communication helps with the involvement of employees by providing them with the main points of the information, explaining the importance of the information, answering any queries that may arise out of this information. This implies an open and on going communication between superiors and subordinates across levels of the correctional organisation.

"More important, administrators must ensure that policies are consistently and fairly applied by all staff throughout the entire correctional institution…..Both application of policies and their outcomes must be fair and just….Consistency and fairness are key here" (ibid. p. 201)

Recognising and rewarding personnel who internalise the policies should be routine rather than punishment of ones who do not follow the policies.

The major stressors of role conflict and ambiguity can be decreased through constant communication, feedback, surveys of correctional staff, benchmarking other organisations, promulgating a system that values its members and is open to change.

Inclusion of women and minorities: Women and ethnic groups are relatively new entrants to corrections. While most correctional departments have made excellent attempts and have succeeded
in including women and minorities, there are still attitudes at the coal-face that are impediments to more success stories. It is not rare to still see negative attitudes towards minorities and women as discrimination can be subtle, sexual harassment covert and take forms of non inclusion in social groups. Such non inclusion reduces the informal sharing of vital work knowledge that social work groups so often share freely.

Social activities that break barriers and aim at removing the hidden discrimination targeted against minorities and women should be undertaken by correctional administration. While there might be dialogue at the top end of management with various communities, local management needs to be seen to have an open and including environment.

Humour: Correctional staff also uses certain strategies to reduce their stress through humour. “…the type of humour prison officers appreciate is what they themselves call ‘sick’, ‘black’, ‘toilet’ or ‘gallows’ humour….Such humour may also be employed in tragic and shocking situations, such as when a prisoner has committed suicide or ‘cut up’. (Crawley 2004 p. 48) Outsiders may assume, when they see such humour, this confirms their perspective of prison officers as callous and insensitive. Officers regularly use humour to deal with the stresses of work which helps them combat intense emotional labour. This has parallels with professionals from other fields like medical staff, ambulance crew and firefighters who also use depersonalisation as a strategy to cope with intense situations.

“Under threat or in danger, an occupational group might easily disintegrate in panic, but humour and laughter usually manage to keep its members together: they talk, as it were, some common sense into each other, providing energy and even hope, and thereby strengthen their morale. Humour puts things into perspective and restores social reality” (ibid. p. 49-50)

Outsiders to corrections need to understand that this kind of humour is a coping mechanism used by individuals facing events that others in the community are loath to even fathom may exist in reality.

Job content: Correctional work is numbing at most times given its iterative disposition. Based on anecdotal evidence getting bored is a stressor that can lead to low self esteem, decrease in motivation and frustration with the job. To combat this, correctional administration needs to undertake job rotation, working in other areas than the prison, interacting with members of the community to see the impact of imprisonment on families. Constant training to hone office’s skills for future needs can add value to their sense of being and will give them access to the bigger picture which so often is also trapped behind the razor wires.

References:


Manbir Kohli is a Senior Correctional Officer at Parklea Correctional Centre NSW. He has a Masters Degree in Economics, Diploma in IT (Multimedia) besides qualifications in Front Line Management, Training and Assessment. In his previous avatar, Manbir managed businesses in telecom and logistics, experimented with a training and assessment role besides still finding his way in life.