

Typology of Correctional Officers

Correctional officers serve an important role in the criminal justice system. Correctional officers are responsible for the care, custody, and control of inmates in jails and prisons. Correctional officers must also ensure safety, security, and order within these correctional institutions. Naturally, correctional officers approach these duties in many different ways. Research indicates there are several types of correctional officers, with some who focus more on the strict rule enforcement aspects of the job, others who focus more on the caring aspects, and yet others still who fall somewhere along this continuum. The research on the typology of correctional officers often examines how staff and inmates perceive the role of the officer. This work also includes direct observations of correctional officer and inmate interactions. A review of this literature suggests there are five main typologies of correctional officers: True carer, limited carer, old school, conflicted, and damaged.

A true carer, or people worker, is an officer who approaches the supervision of inmates with a caring and supportive attitude. These officers listen to inmates and try to assist and encourage inmates to behave prosocially. True carer officers seem to enjoy correctional work and they easily form relationships with inmates. This type of officer seeks to gain inmate obedience and order through communication and respect.

A limited carer officer approaches inmate supervision with consistency. These officers meet inmate requests and show concern in complicated situations. Although limited carers are somewhat sympathetic to inmates, this sympathy is more limited than that of the true carer officers. The limited carer follows the rules, but makes slight adjustments depending on the circumstances.

An old school officer, or rule enforcer, is less emotionally involved than a true carer. This group tends to consist of older, more seasoned officers. Old school officers approach inmate supervision in a uniform and emotional manner. These officers expect inmates to follow the rules, and they will respond to an inmate's needs as long as they are in compliance. Old school officers are less sympathetic than limited carer's and are not willing to bend the rules regardless of the circumstances. These officers are also more prone to use force and are quick to punish inmate misbehavior.

Conflicted officers consider "caring" for inmates as an important aspect of their job. This group of officers aspires to help inmates become better people; however, in contrast to the true carer, conflicted officers have unrealistic goals. Conflicted officers tend to view inmates as the problem to be solved, rather than identifying an inmate's problems as situational and separate from them as people. Conflicted officers hold a negative perception of inmates and feel threatened by them. These officers derive job satisfaction from their relationships with colleagues and in protecting the public.

Finally, damaged officers are those who have been stigmatized by a negative situation on the job. This may include such things as being assaulted by an inmate or a having a lack of support from administrators. Although members of this group may have initially cared for inmates, they are disgruntled and no longer interested in this role. This group of officers express

the most negative views toward inmates and also feel the most threatened by them. Damaged officers often take a hard line approach toward the enforcement of institutional rules and are quick to punish even minor rule violations. These officers are likely to be more aggressive than is necessary when dealing with inmates and they are also the most likely to be abusive.

Working in a correctional environment is a difficult task. Gaining compliance among inmates is complex and officers respond in a variety of ways. Although the evaluation research on the typologies of correctional officers is limited, it appears that better effects are achieved when officers adopt a caring role.

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See also correction officers and discretion; correction officers subculture; misconduct by corrections officers

Further Reading

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