

## Correctional Staff Perceptions of Disordered Offenders

There has been little research on the perceptions of correctional officers toward mentally disordered offenders. However, the authors of a recent study believe that officer perceptions are extremely relevant to the management of inmate mental health.

Correctional officers are in a position to identify offenders in need of mental health services and often to help some of these individuals. In addition, the prison environment has been shown to play an important role in the mental health of inmates. Correctional officers, a significant part of the prison environment, may well be able to reduce inmate stress.

The study evaluated the perceptions of correctional officers toward mentally disordered inmates in order to gather information that could prove valuable in the planning of officer-training programs. The authors hypothesized that correctional officers perceived mentally ill offenders less favourably than mentally ill patients, other inmates, and the population in general.

The participants in the study were drawn from a potential sample of approximately 85 correctional officers employed at the maximum security Vancouver Pretrial Services Centre. Some of the officers could not be contacted because of shift changes or vacation leave. However, all of the 78 officers contacted agreed to participate in the study.

The participants were asked to rate mentally disordered offenders, mentally ill patients, other prisoners and most people in terms of 18 items.

In addition, the study assessed officers' interest in receiving more training to deal with mentally disordered patients. The officers were shown four statements about training and were asked to rate their feelings about each one on a scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

The officers also rated their feelings about their professional contact with inmates: A seven-point scale measured the degree to which they felt in control, successful, active, helpful, effective, powerful and confident when dealing with inmates.

Demographic information gathered from the officers revealed no significant links between attitudes and individual variables. The variables examined included age, sex, education, length of employment as a correctional officer, and the perceived amount of contact with mentally disordered prisoners.

The average age of the sample was 32 years, average education was *some* college, and average number of years in corrections was 6.6. On a scale of 1 to 5 (in which 5 represented frequent contact), the average level of perceived contact with mentally ill persons during the previous three months was 3.7.

According to results from the ratings, there were extreme differences between the officers' perceptions of people in general and the other three categories (prisoners, mentally disordered prisoners, and mentally ill patients). The "most people" group was viewed the most favourably, and no further analysis was conducted on officers' perceptions of this group.

Comparisons of the other three groups showed that mentally disordered prisoners were regarded as less predictable, less rational and more mysterious than other prisoners. However, prisoners in general were seen as more manipulative than mentally disordered prisoners.

A second comparison revealed that mentally disordered prisoners were perceived as more dangerous than mentally ill patients. Finally, mentally ill patients were seen as less bad and less manipulative than prisoners but also as more irrational and unpredictable.

The correctional officers as a group indicated strong concerns about working with mentally ill offenders. Ninety percent felt that it added stress to their job. Eighty-nine percent thought that mentally disordered offenders should be kept in facilities separate from the rest of the population. Almost all the officers were interested in additional training to deal with mentally disordered offenders. In contrast, they reported that they generally felt confident in dealing with the rest of the inmate population.

One item which discriminated officer perceptions of mentally ill offenders and mental patients was "dangerousness." This perception, or misperception, of the uniform dangerousness of mentally ill offenders would be an important issue for training programs to focus on.

This study clearly indicates that correctional officers have concerns about mentally disordered offenders and would like to improve the ways in which they deal with these offenders.

In the final analysis, it is important to note that, although the participants in this study were trained under the most current programs, they still felt unprepared to deal with the mentally ill. Future research should examine training programs in order to identify the source of gaps in understanding. The perceptions and needs of the people working most directly with mentally disturbed individuals should be addressed.

Studies on whether the presence of mentally disordered inmates is stressful for the rest of the prison population might also be an interesting area of research. In such studies, samples would have to be selected very carefully in order to avoid misclassification of offenders.

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Kropp, P. Randall, Cox, David N., Roesch, Ronald, & Eaves, Derek (1989). The Perceptions of Correctional Officers Toward Mentally Disordered Offenders. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 1, 181-188.