

What Makes an Effective Correctional Officer? Views from Staff and Inmates

Do inmates, correctional officers, and their supervisors, differ in their perceptions about what makes an effective correctional officer? Canadian psychologists Dr. Cindy Wahler and Dr. Paul Gendreau investigated this question in a recent survey conducted at four Ontario provincial institutions. They asked inmates and staff to rate the importance of 61 different behaviours that are associated with the work of correctional officers. Ninety inmates, and 109 institutional staff participated in the survey. Although the beliefs and attitudes of correctional officers have frequently been researched in the past, this study is unique in that it is the first to compare inmate beliefs with the beliefs held by prison staff.

Using the questionnaire responses, Wahler and Gendreau identified three major dimensions of correctional officer effectiveness:

Responsibility/Leadership Skills (e.g., co-operating with other staff and providing inmates with directions); Behaviour Skill Deficits (e.g., lethargy and emotional volatility with other staff and inmates); and Inmate Relationship Skills (e.g., providing inmates with support and understanding).

There were no differences between the perceptions of correctional officers and their supervisors on any of the dimensions of correctional officer effectiveness. Staff from different institutions also held similar beliefs. Inmates and staff, however, did differ in their perceptions. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that staff valued responsibility/ leadership skills to a greater extent than did inmates. In addition, inmates attached more significance to the dimension of inmate relationship skills. There were no differences in beliefs about the role played by behaviour skill deficits in decreasing a correctional officer's effectiveness.

The study also revealed some interesting differences in perceptions within the inmate sample. Younger inmates and those who had shorter periods of previous incarceration viewed responsibility/leadership skills as more important than their older and more institutionalized counterparts. Wahler and Gendreau also reported that inmates who had experienced the longest periods of incarceration in maximum security institutions were less likely to view inmate relationship skills as important.

Another interesting finding that emerged from the study was that younger supervisors were more likely than older supervisors to value inmate relationship skills. One interpretation is that this finding may reflect a shift in emphasis from the custodial function to the rehabilitative function of incarceration.

Wahler, C., & Gendreau, P. (in press). Perceived characteristics of effective correctional officers by officers, supervisors and inmates across three different types of institutions. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*.