

Do Correctional Officers Support Rehabilitation?

Researchers in both the United States and Canada have devoted a great deal of attention to the study of attitudes toward inmates. There is a particular interest in identifying the personal and environmental factors that determine the attitudes of correctional officers. By discovering the factors associated with undesirable attitudes, it is believed that more effective methods of personnel selection can be developed.

Recent studies of correctional officers in two state correctional systems in the U. S. have demonstrated that while many prison guards endorse somewhat punitive attitudes toward inmates, the majority believe that inmates can and should be rehabilitated. The studies also reveal that correctional officer attitudes toward punishment and rehabilitation do not differ remarkably from the types of attitudes found in the general public. Despite comprehensive research efforts, however, very few factors that could be reliably linked to correctional officer attitudes were identified in the two most recent studies.

University of Cincinnati Criminologist Dr. Francis Cullen and his associates examined the custodial and rehabilitative attitudes of 155 correctional officers in a southern United States correctional system. They found that highly custodial attitudes toward inmates did not exclude the belief that rehabilitation was an important function of incarceration. About 78% of the guards said that "Many people don't realize it, but prisons are too soft on the inmates" and 75% agreed that "Keeping the inmates from causing trouble is my major concern while I'm on the job". However, 70% of the guards also believed that "Rehabilitating a criminal is just as important as making a criminal pay for his or her crime", and only 22% of the correctional officers in the sample felt that rehabilitation "just does not work".

Dr. John T. Whitehead of East Tennessee State University and Dr. Charles Lindquist of the University of Alabama at Birmingham conducted a similar study of 258 guards employed by the Alabama Department of Corrections. Their findings were very comparable to the results obtained by Cullen and his associates.

For example, Whitehead and Lindquist found that 75% of the correctional officers believed that "If an officer is lenient with inmates, they will take advantage of him", and 74% said that "A good principle is not to get close to inmates". At the same time, only 11 % of the Alabama guards felt that rehabilitation was a waste of time and money" and only 22% believed that "Counseling is a job for counselors, not officers".

In the study conducted by Cullen and his associates the researchers also examined a host of factors that they thought may have been related to correctional officer attitudes: institutional security level, shift work, role conflict, perception of job dangerousness, work stress, supervisory support, length of job experience, age, gender, race, education, and age at occupational entry.

The findings suggested that support for a custodial orientation was more common among guards who worked night shifts and those reporting that they experienced "role conflict" in their work (e.g., lack of clarity about rules and procedures). Support for rehabilitation was more likely among blacks and officers who were older when they first entered the field.

In the study of Alabama correctional officers, Whitehead and Lindquist also investigated the effects of

the variables studied by Cullen and his associates. Although they did not discover "night shift" or "role conflict" effects, they did find that officers who were older when they entered corrections preferred less social distance between inmates and guards. Interestingly, while black officers preferred more distance from inmates than white officers, the black officers had significantly less punitive attitudes toward inmates.

Generally, the results from the two surveys were quite comparable. However, both groups of researchers admitted that they had found fewer links between correctional officer characteristics and attitudes toward inmates than they had expected when they began their studies. The relationships they discovered also suggested that personal characteristics and work environment factors do not have a strong effect on attitudes toward inmates. Whitehead and Lindquist remarked that other yet unstudied personality factors may play a role in correctional officer attitudes.

The attitude profiles provided by the two studies are at variance with popular beliefs about how guards view rehabilitation. The majority of correctional officers surveyed in these two American states believed that rehabilitation of offenders was not only possible, but that counselling of inmates could be an integral component of the prison guard's role. The extent to which Canadian correctional officers endorse similar views is an interesting question for future research in the Service.

Cullen, F.T., Lutze, F.E., Link, B.G., Link & Wolfe, N.T. (1989). The correctional orientation of prison guards: Do officers support rehabilitation? *Federal Probation*, 53, 33-42.

Whitehead, J. T., & Lindquist, C. A.(1989). Determinants of correctional officers' professional orientation. *Justice Quarterly*, 6, 70-87.