



How Staff and Incarcerated People Differ—and Agree—on Safety and Well-Being Inside Prison

Key Takeaways

- Both security staff and nonsecurity staff reported feeling significantly safer and sleeping better than incarcerated people across five Minnesota prisons.
- Security staff reported better emotional well-being than incarcerated people, but all three groups—security staff, nonsecurity staff, and incarcerated people—reported similar levels of psychological wellness, physical health, and life outlook.
- Facilities with higher staffing levels (more staff relative to incarcerated people) were associated with better perceptions of safety, sleep, and wellness outcomes for both staff and incarcerated people.

Why This Matters

Prisons are complex environments in which both staff and incarcerated people spend significant time. How each group feels about safety and well-being—what researchers call correctional climate—shapes daily life inside facilities and can affect outcomes ranging from staff burnout to incarcerated people's behavior and post-release adjustment. Despite its importance, correctional leaders have had limited research comparing how different groups within the same facility experience these conditions.

Prior research has focused mostly on one group at a time. A review of 16 studies found that staff and incarcerated people share concerns about safety, health, and services, suggesting that improvements may benefit both groups (Hull et al., 2023). A large Dutch prison study found that staff and incarcerated people rated conditions similarly, although having staff with more supportive attitudes toward incarcerated people improved how incarcerated people perceived their environment (Molleman & Leeuw, 2012). A recent US study found that incarcerated people consistently rated conditions—including safety and services—more negatively than staff (McCoy et al., 2025).

None of these studies separated security staff from nonsecurity staff, leaving an important gap. This study filled that gap by comparing perceptions of safety, sleep quality, psychological wellness, emotional wellness, physical health, and life outlook across all three groups in five Minnesota Department of Corrections facilities.

How the Study Worked

The study drew on surveys completed by 1,148 people across five Minnesota prisons in 2024: 548 security staff (such as correctional officers), 229 nonsecurity staff (such as teachers, nurses, and caseworkers), and 371 incarcerated people. Security staff completed an email-based survey, while incarcerated people completed a computer-based survey in facility education units. Survey questions measured six outcomes—perceptions of safety, sleep quality, psychological wellness, emotional wellness, physical wellness, and life outlook—using items adapted from established survey tools. Researchers also collected facility-level data on staffing ratios and misconduct rates for each prison.

To compare the three groups, the researchers used regression analysis—a statistical method that estimates the relationship between group membership and each outcome while accounting for other factors such as age, sex, race, education, and

facility-level conditions. This approach is more reliable than simply comparing average scores because it controls for characteristics that might otherwise explain observed differences, making the group comparisons more meaningful.

What Was Learned

- **Staff felt safer than incarcerated people.** Both security and nonsecurity staff reported significantly higher perceptions of safety and better sleep quality than incarcerated people. These gaps persisted even after accounting for individual characteristics and facility-level conditions.
- **Security staff reported better emotional wellness than incarcerated people.** Emotional wellness—related to self-confidence and self-esteem—was significantly higher among security staff than incarcerated people. The gap between nonsecurity staff and incarcerated people was smaller and not statistically significant.
- **All three groups reported similar psychological wellness, physical health, and life outlook.** Despite differences in their roles and levels of freedom, staff and incarcerated people reported similar levels of optimism, physical health, and sense of purpose. This suggests these domains may reflect shared strains of living or working in a correctional environment.
- **Higher staffing levels improved outcomes for everyone.** Facilities with more staff relative to incarcerated people showed better safety perceptions, sleep quality, psychological and emotional wellness, and life outlook—for both staff and incarcerated people.

What This Means in Practice

Staffing levels are among the most powerful tools correctional leaders have for improving institutional climate. This study found that higher staff-to-incarcerated-person ratios were associated with better outcomes across five of the six measured domains—for staff and incarcerated people alike. Addressing staffing shortfalls may therefore be among the most important steps a facility can take to improve both safety and well-being across the board.

At the same time, the findings show that some gaps—particularly in perceived safety and emotional wellness—reflect the fundamentally different positions staff and incarcerated people occupy within the institution. Staff have formal authority, can leave at the end of a shift, and operate within organizational support structures; incarcerated people experience continuous confinement with less control over their surroundings. The authors note that institution-wide wellness initiatives addressing shared stressors—such as overcrowding, unpredictability, and exposure to conflict—are likely most effective when paired with role-specific supports, such as trauma-informed resources for staff and coping or behavioral programming for incarcerated people.

Source article

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