



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

What Drives Wellness Among Prison Staff

Key Takeaways

- Staff perceptions of their agency's policies and practices were among the strongest predictors of both personal and professional wellness outcomes.
- Female, nonwhite, older, and more educated staff reported better wellness across several measures than their colleagues.
- Staff felt safer in facilities with lower rates of misconduct and higher staff-to-incarcerated-person (IP) ratios.

Why This Matters

Correctional staff face ongoing stress, trauma, and health risks on the job, and these can have lasting effects on their mental, physical, and professional well-being. More than 350,000 correctional officers work in US prisons and jails, and they experience mental and physical health problems at rates well above those of the general public and other first responders. Understanding what supports their wellness is an urgent, practical concern, especially as agencies struggle to recruit and retain enough staff.

Earlier research helps set the stage but leaves gaps in understanding the correctional factors that affect staff wellness. Studies show that officers face health challenges at higher rates than most groups, and that staff perceptions of the fairness of decisions and outcomes predict job stress and perceptions of safety.

Much of this earlier work examined only one or two outcomes and was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic changed correctional operations. This study fills that gap by examining many individual, job, environmental, and organizational factors together across nine wellness outcomes and by introducing a new measure of how staff perceive their agency's policies.

How the Study Worked

The data came from a voluntary, confidential survey of correctional officers and non-security staff at five Minnesota prisons. The survey ran from April to June 2024 and included a sample of 585 employees (29.2 percent response rate). Alongside survey responses, the researchers used administrative records to measure each facility's staff-IP ratio and misconduct rate. They measured demographics (sex, race, age, education), job type, and work unit, as well as responses to a new set of questions about how staff perceive their agency's policies and practices. The outcomes fell into four professional wellness measures (confidence engaging with incarcerated people, perceptions of safety, job satisfaction, and burnout) and five personal wellness measures (psychological, emotional, and physical wellness, life outlook, and sleep quality).

The researchers used regression analysis to determine the factors most strongly associated with staff wellness. This allowed them to compare each variable side by side to identify which ones stood out on their own while accounting for all the other factors at the same time.

What Was Learned

- **Staff perceptions of agency policy mattered most.** Staff who viewed their facility's policies as transparent and helpful to their daily work reported better wellness across all nine outcomes. This was one of the strongest predictors in every model.

- **Staffing and misconduct shaped perceptions of safety.** Staff felt safer in facilities with higher staff-IP ratios and lower misconduct rates. These two factors predicted perceptions of safety but none of the other outcomes.
- **Some staff groups reported better wellness.** Female, nonwhite, older, and more educated staff scored higher on several measures. For example, nonwhite staff reported lower burnout and better psychological, emotional, and physical wellness than white staff.
- **Security and non-security staff differed in specific ways.** Security staff felt more confident interacting with incarcerated people but reported lower job satisfaction than non-security staff. Otherwise, both groups reported similar levels of stress and health challenges.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest takeaway is that staff wellness is strongly associated with how staff view their agency's policies. The researchers state that correctional organizations can support wellness by making policies transparent and designed to support employees' day-to-day work. They add that leaving frontline staff out of policy discussions can lower morale and increase stress, so leadership should actively request staff feedback and adjust policies as needed to build trust and buy-in. Because staff views of policy were among the strongest predictors across all nine outcomes, the authors point to organizational policy and leadership as central to employees' health and job satisfaction.

The researchers also offer several cautions and additional points for practitioners. Both security and non-security staff faced similar stress and health challenges, so wellness programs should reach all employees rather than officers alone and should be tailored to the different needs of male and female staff. Older and more experienced staff reported better wellness on several measures and are described as a source of institutional stability. The researchers suggest drawing on these employees for formal mentorship programs, because mentorship from peers or higher-ranking coworkers may improve staff stress and health. Finally, the researchers note that staff felt safer where staffing levels were higher and misconduct was lower. This suggests that wellness efforts may support mental and physical health directly while indirectly easing staffing shortages over time.

Source article

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For more information, contact Margarita Parker, Senior Research Specialist (parkerm@cna.org)

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