

Prison Conditions are Working Conditions

An estimated 800,000 people work in American prisons and jails across the country. Workers in prisons range from uniformed corrections officers walking along cell blocks to the civilian staff which usually includes nurses, therapists, cooks and educators. Too often, overcrowding, understaffing and budget cuts result in dangerous conditions that put workers and prisoners alike in jeopardy.

Overcrowding and Understaffing

The combined problems of overcrowding and understaffing in America's prisons and jails are a significant threat to the health and safety of anyone who spends time inside a correctional facility. As of 2014, 17 states had more people imprisoned than the correctional institutions had capacity for, leading to dangerously overcrowded facilitiesⁱ. States have also seen steady increases in understaffing and numbers of open correction officer positionsⁱⁱ.

Private prisons have additional incentives to hire fewer staff. A federal judge recently found private prison operator CCA in contempt of court for failing to adequately address severe staffing shortages at the Idaho Correctional Centerⁱⁱⁱ and problems with the facility were so rampant that state cancelled CCA's contract and is now running the prison with public employees, instead of contractors.^{iv}

Stress and Burnout

Workers who make their living behind bars often experience high rates of stress and correctional officers at the most crowded prisons report the highest levels of stress and fear of inmates.^v Not only is this stress unhealthy for the individual employees, leading to serious medical problems like heart disease and hypertension^{vi}, burnout and

stress can also lead to unsafe correctional facilities and contribute to higher turnover rates and lower productivity.^{vii}

Mental Illness

Many advocates and experts have been rightly concerned about the lack of appropriate services for inmates who suffer from mental illness and, by some accounts, now account for 50 percent of all people currently incarcerated^{viii}. Correctional staff regularly interacts with a population that is suffering from untreated illnesses or are suicidal, also contributing to job-related stress. According to research, correctional officer stress is also linked to psychological and emotional disorders and COs report serious psychological distress at a rate about twice that of the general public.^{ix}

Violence & Self-Harm

From 1999 to 2008, 113 correctional officers lost their lives while at work^x. COs experience non-fatal violent incidents more than people working in every other profession besides police officers^{xi} and COs commit suicide at twice the rate of the general population.^{xii} In 2007, experts reported violence against correctional staff members resulted in 2,000 injuries every year.^{xiii} The Bureau of Justice Assistance found that staff at private prisons experienced 49% more assaults than their public counterparts.^{xiv}

Coming Together

There are instances of solidarity between correctional officers and inmates in order to push for changes to prison conditions that could be modeled in other states. In Texas, for example, a lack of air conditioning during brutal summertime heat led to dangerous conditions for prisoners and correctional officers. The Texas Civil Rights Project joined the University of Texas School of Law Civil Rights clinic to sue the state on behalf of people incarcerated at facilities without proper temperature control. The union representing correction officers at the same facilities publicly supported the lawsuit and has advocated for air conditioning in prisoner housing areas.^{xv}

Overcrowding and understaffing are working together to create harsh and inhumane conditions for both workers and prisoners. And America's prisons and jails should not be where we address mental illness in America. Common sense solutions that create safer workplaces, better living conditions for inmates and effective community mental health systems can be fostered by powerful and meaningful collaboration between unions, prison reform advocates, prisoner rights organizations and criminal justice experts.

Quick Facts:

- Correctional staff members suffer **2,000 injuries** from non-fatal violent incidents on the job every year^{xvi}, and from 1999 to 2008 **113 correctional officers lost their lives** while at work^{xviii}.
- Staff at **private prisons experienced 49% more assaults** than public prisons staff^{xix}.
- **44% of correctional officers report symptoms of PTSD** and they also report higher levels of depression, sleep difficulty, and memory impairment^{xx}.
- Correctional facility workers have **higher rates of depression, anxiety^{xxi}, divorce and substance abuse^{xxii}** than the general public and other law enforcement professionals.
- **Correctional officers commit suicide at nearly twice the rate** of police officers and the general public^{xxiii}.

ⁱ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/09/20/prisons-in-these-17-states-are-filled-over-capacity/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.tn.gov/correction/pdf/StatisticalAbstract2014.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.wsmv.com/story/23445037/judge-cca-regularly-violated-settlement-contract>

^{iv} <http://www.spokesman.com/blogs/boise/2014/jul/28/state-says-cca-left-chronically-ill-inmates-without-medications-it-handed-back-over-idaho-prison/>
v Martin, J. L., Lichtenstein, B., Jenkot, R., & Forde, D. (2012). "They Can Take Us over Any Time They Want": Correctional Officers' Responses to Prison Crowding. *Prison Journal*, 92(1), 88-105

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viii Sarteschi, Christine M. "Mentally Ill Offenders Involved with the U.S. Criminal Justice System," *Sage Open*, July 2013, 1-11. - See more at:

<http://journalistsresource.org/studies/government/criminal-justice/mentally-ill-offenders-u-s-criminal-justice-system#sthash.OFq7mEoE.dpuf>

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x Konda S, Reichard AA, Tiesman HM *Occupational Injuries among U.S. Correctional Officers*, 99-08, *Journal of Safety Research* 43:181-186.

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xii *New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report* (2009). Trenton, NJ, New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force.

xiii National Institute of Justice. (2007). *Improving Correctional Officer Safety: Reducing Inmate Weapons*

xiv *Emerging Issues on Privatized Prisons Monograph: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, James Austin, Ph.D., Garry Coventry, Ph.D., National Council on Crime and Delinquency, NCJ181249 February 2001, Washington, DC, p.57*

xv http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/20/justice/texas-prison-heat-lawsuit/index.html?hpt=hp_t2

xvi National Institute of Justice. (2007). *Improving Correctional Officer Safety: Reducing Inmate Weapons*. Retrieved April 17, 2013

xviii Konda S, Reichard AA, Tiesman HM *Occupational Injuries among U.S. Correctional Officers*, 99-08, *Journal of Safety Research* 43:181-186.

xix *Emerging Issues on Privatized Prisons Monograph: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, James Austin, Ph.D., Garry Coventry, Ph.D., National Council on Crime and Delinquency, NCJ181249 February 2001, Washington, DC, p.57*

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xxii *New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report* (2009). Trenton, NJ, New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force. Retrieved April 10, 2013

xxiii *Ibid*