



# A systematic and meta-analytic review of the literature on correctional officers: Identifying new avenues for research

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Correctional officers  
Systematic review  
Meta-analysis  
Job stress  
Organizational commitment  
Job satisfaction

## ABSTRACT

Scholarly interest in the experiences and behaviors of correctional officers has increased over the past several decades. Yet, considerably less is known about those who oversee and manage prison populations relative to other criminal justice professionals. In this study, we perform a systematic review and meta-analysis of 172 peer-reviewed articles published between 1980 and 2017 that include samples of correctional officers. The goal of this review is to “take stock” of the correctional officer literature in an effort to inform future research, policy, and practice. Specifically, we examine publication trends over the past several decades in addition to examining all outcomes across the included studies. We find that job satisfaction, job stress, and organizational commitment are the most frequently examined outcomes. Next, we examine the most commonly included correlates across each of these outcomes, which include age, female, white, education, experience, supervisor support, and peer support. Findings reveal that organizational factors such as supervisor support and peer support influence each of these outcomes, while demographic characteristics have mixed effects. Recommendations for future research include the need to examine other attitudes and experiences of correctional officers in addition to exploring variation in the effects examined in this review.

## 1. Introduction

Correctional officers work in environments that demand constant awareness of surroundings in an effort to maintain the safety and wellbeing of other staff and inmates (Hepburn & Knepper, 1993; Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011; Poole & Regoli, 1980). These environments expose correctional officers to increased levels of victimization due to the supervision and management of potentially violent offenders in enclosed spaces (e.g., housing units, exercise yards) (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Harrell, 2011). In addition to the risk of victimization, correctional officers are tasked with maintaining institutional security and managing the needs of the inmate population in a manner that is consistent with organizational goals and directives that may induce stress, dissatisfaction, or turnover (Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013; Huckabee, 1992; Lambert, 2001a; Lambert, Barton, & Hogan, 1999). Due to these concerns, a growing body of literature has examined “the work-related, institution-related, and psycho-social” factors that influence correctional officers' attitudes and behaviors (Ferdik & Smith, 2017, p.22).

In an effort to understand the factors that influence correctional officer attitudes and behaviors, researchers have relied on reviews of the literature to synthesize study findings, inform model specification,

and identify avenues for future research. Most efforts to take stock of the literature on correctional officers were published prior to the early 2000s (Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Finn, 1998; Huckabee, 1992; Lambert, 2001a, 2001b; Lambert et al., 1999; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2002a; Philliber, 1987; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). In total, we identified 11 reviews that examined a variety of correctional officer experiences and attitudes that include job stress, job satisfaction, turnover intent, and the physiological health of correctional officers (Finney et al., 2013; Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2017). These reviews have found that model specification, such as the inclusion of relevant correlates is improving (Finney et al., 2013; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). To date, however, relatively few studies have taken stock of research on correctional officers. Such an investigation is important as correctional agencies attempt to identify “what matters” in regards to understanding correctional officer experiences that can better inform policy and practice in a challenging profession that is tasked with accomplishing a growing list of often competing goals (Cullen, Link, Wolfe, & Frank, 1985; Lambert et al., 2017).

In this study, we perform a systematic review of 172 peer-reviewed publications that contained samples of correctional officers in which multivariate analyses were conducted between 1980 and 2017. Specifically, we examine the most frequently studied outcomes to

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