

A Pretest-Posttest Evaluation of Academy Training and Fear of Beginning a Correctional Officer Career

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PRISONS ARE UNIQUE environments that have the potential to become dangerous at virtually any moment (Konda et al., 2013; Sykes, 1958). As such, their “awe-factor” is regularly used by pop culture in movies and television shows to increase viewership. One such example is *Inside the World’s Toughest Prisons*, a television show depicting life inside some of the most dangerous prisons around the world. Because what *actually* goes on inside American prisons is relatively unknown and hidden from public view, these types of shows have the potential to shape the way that people view prisons in general (Dolovich, 2022). Put simply, by most media accounts, prisons are depicted as scary places, full of violence, where the risk of becoming the victim of an attack is ever present (Burton, 2022).

Individuals deciding whether to work in corrections are not immune to the media’s depiction of dangerous prisons. Given that most people entering corrections work have little to no experience working in prisons or other types of corrections facilities (Burton, Jonson, Miller, & Cook, 2022), it is likely these

individuals bring some level of fear with them into their work as a correctional officer due to graphic and violent media depictions they have viewed countless times. This incoming fear is further compounded by the fact that, unlike the case in other occupations they may have held, correctional officers at work are outnumbered by people who have broken the law and may have a history of violent and anti-social behavior (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Feld, 2020). One rather shocking example of this reality came out of Georgia, where one correctional officer pleaded for help at a Georgia House of Representatives meeting by stating “On a ‘good day,’ he had maybe six or seven officers to supervise roughly 1,200 people” (Blakinger et al., 2021).

Additionally, demographic factors of correctional officers have been shown to impact their levels of fear. For example, non-White and female officers express a greater perceived danger and concerns about safety associated with working in prison (Garcia, 2008; Gordon & Moriarty, 2007; Gordon et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2013). As a result, imported

characteristics are influencing the trepidation that officers feel concerning the job (Gordon et al., 2013). As fear is related to officers’ decision making, interactions with incarcerated people, increased job stress, lower work satisfaction, greater turnover intentions, and increased susceptibility to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), understanding how to reduce and manage officers’ fear becomes of paramount importance for state departments of correction (Hartley et al., 2013; James & Today, 2018; Stichman & Gordon, 2015; Taxman & Gordon, 2009).

As some of the factors exacerbating correctional officer fear are imported into the job, correctional officer training academies may serve as an opportunity to mitigate and lessen the levels of fearfulness. Thus, the current study explores these issues by measuring the baseline levels of fear among newly hired correctional officers before assuming their posts in state prisons. The study then examines the impact of the training academy experience on officers’ levels of fear. Furthermore, as the prior research has consistently uncovered

differences in fear across demographic factors, separate analyses are conducted with male trainees, female trainees, White trainees, and non-White trainees to identify whether academy training differently affects the levels of fear for various demographic groups.

Academy Training and Fear

When people are hired to work as correctional officers, they receive basic training in academies, similar to police officers. Academies' primary role is to teach officers the requisite skills of the job and ensure they are confident in using them before they take their posts within prisons (Burton et al., 2018; Burton, Jonson, Barnes, et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022, 2023). Moreover, the academy is also responsible for socializing officers into the broader organization and conveying to them the roles and responsibilities of a correctional officer. These issues take on added salience given that many of those who come to the correctional officer occupation have little to no experience working within correctional environments (Burton, Jonson, Miller, & Cook, 2022; Kois et al., 2020).

In addition to these basic functions of academies, correctional officer training should also assuage job-related fears or uncertainties held by the trainees. There are at least two broad mechanisms of the training academy experience through which this could occur (Burton et al., 2018; Kois et al., 2020). First, training teaches officers various skills that should theoretically lead them to feel safer and less fearful while working inside prisons, such as self-defense, de-escalation techniques, and how to use firearms (Burton et al., 2018; Kois et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2022). Second, the officers learn the reality about the prison environment and about those serving time in prisons, which should serve to reduce their fear and apprehension toward this population (Gordon & Baker, 2017; Kois et al., 2020).

Though these relationships are theoretically expected, a gap in the research exists on the personal and psychological effects of training on newly hired officers that go through it. This omission is surprising given the recent realization that officers suffer from a range of negative mental health outcomes, for which fear could be both a precursor and result (Spinaris et al., 2012). The current study is the first of its kind in that it examines newly hired officers' fear of working as correctional officers both prior to and after academy training. Further, the current study explores the differential impacts of academy training on fear for

distinct categories of officers by disaggregating the sample into 4 subgroups: (1) male trainees, (2) female trainees, (3) White trainees, and (4) non-White trainees. Because prior research reveals that correctional officers' fear is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, affecting not only the officers but the organization at large (Taxman & Gordon, 2009), this exploratory study provides a critical insight into an overlooked aspect of correctional officer academy training.

Methods

The data were collected in the course of a larger evaluation project that sought to more comprehensively understand newly hired correctional officers and their academy training (e.g., Burton, Jonson, Miller, et al., 2022; Burton et al., 2023). The researchers received permission to collect data from one Southern and two Midwestern states' correctional officer training academies in 2017–2018. The data collection process relied on a staff member from each academy that served as a liaison between the researchers and the training academies. The individuals read scripted explanations of the study to all the newly hired correctional officers (i.e., trainees) before and after academy training. The questionnaires were completed using pencil/paper and, when finished, were mailed back to the researchers at their academic institution. In total, 764 officers were recruited across the three states to take part in the research study. Of those, 513 completed pretest (prior to academy training) and posttest (after academy training) questionnaires that included the items used in this study (67.2 percent response rate). Regarding the demographic makeup of the sample, slightly less than 3 in 10 officers are female (29.7 percent) and over two-thirds (68.2 percent) are White officers. The average age of the sample is 30.5 years old.

Though a variety of domains have been

used to measure correctional officer fear, such as cognitive and emotional fear (e.g., Gordon & Baker, 2017), the current study relies on a global measure of fear. Thus, officers were asked the following question: "How fearful are you to begin a career as a correctional officer?" Officers were asked to respond on a 10-point scale (ranging from 1 = *not fearful at all* to 10 = *extremely fearful*), with higher values corresponding to greater levels of fear.

Results

Figure 1 shows the average level of fear held by the full sample and different demographic subgroups. The columns show the average levels of fear the trainees entered the academy with and their level of fear after the training, the difference between their pre- and post-academy fear, and the statistics generated by dependent samples *t*-tests that assessed whether academy training impacted the levels of fear associated with beginning their career as a correctional officer.

Starting with baseline levels of fear for the full sample, the data reveal that individuals entered training academies with an average of 3.26/10 on the fear scale. After training, the average score dropped to a 3.06/10 on the scale. A paired-sample *t*-test revealed the decrease in fear was not significant. Turning to the subgroup analyses, levels of fear differed for male and female trainees both before and after training. Female trainees began training with the highest level of fear of all the subgroups at 3.45/10. By contrast, males began training with a fear of 3.18/10. For both groups, academy training did not have a significant impact on their fear of beginning their work as a correctional officer. One thing to note, however, is that after training, female trainees still possess more fear than male trainees prior to training.

Examining the sample by racial subgroups disclosed a significant finding: White trainees

FIGURE 1.
Fear of beginning a correctional officer career before and after academy training, by gender and race

	Pre-academy Fear	Post-academy Fear Mean (SD)	Difference Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	p-value
Full sample (n = 513)	3.26 (2.04)	3.06 (2.05)	.19	1.69	.09
Male trainees (n = 361)	3.18 (2.02)	2.96 (2.05)	.22	1.60	.11
Female trainees (n = 152)	3.45 (2.02)	3.31 (2.03)	.14	0.65	.51
White trainees (n = 353)	3.37 (2.01)	3.06 (1.91)	.31	2.46*	.01
Non-White trainees (n = 160)	3.01 (2.08)	3.08 (2.33)	-.07	-0.29	.77

* Denotes significant $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed)

experienced a significant reduction in their fear of beginning a correctional officer career after academy training. Their fear when they entered the academy was a 3.45/10; after completing academy training, it dropped to 3.06/10. For non-White trainees, the academy training actually led to an increase in fear (though the change was nonsignificant).

To summarize, the results indicate that all trainees, regardless of race or gender, enter training academies with a global level of fear between a 3.01 to 3.45 on a 10-point scale. When considering the standard deviations of these averages, approximately 70 percent of trainees possess a level of fear between 1 to 5 out of 10. Thus, although officers hold a low-to moderate-level of fear generally, variation does exist at the demographic level. Moreover, the only demographic subgroup experiencing a significant decline in fear are White trainees.

Supplemental Analyses

Because the trainees in our sample participated in academies located in three different states, it is important to assess whether the effects observed were a result of training at the state level or the individual level. In other words, are changes (or non-changes) in fear a function of one state's training academy, or a function of individuals within academies being exposed to training and their fear changing (or not) as a result. To assess this possibility, three regression models were computed. First an ordinal regression was estimated whereby the pretest levels of fear were regressed on binary state variables. This allows an examination to determine whether incoming levels of fear (i.e., prior to training) differed at the state level. The coefficients from the model were nonsignificant; thus, officers' incoming levels of fear of working as correctional officers do not differ by state.

The same process was carried out again but this time with the posttest levels of fear regressed on the binary state variables. Again, the coefficients were nonsignificant. This result implies that upon completing academy training, the level of officers' fear is not associated with the state where they received the training. Finally, delta scores were calculated by subtracting posttest levels of fear from pretest levels of fear. Then, the delta variable was regressed on the binary state variables to assess whether the state where the officers were trained explains variation in the changes observed in the officers' level of fear from prior to and after their academy training. Again, the coefficients were not significant, which

conveys that the state in which the officer was trained did not impact whether the level of fear changed as a result of training. These supplementary findings thus lend stronger evidence that changes (or non-changes) in fear are related more to characteristics at the individual level (e.g., by demographic factors) rather than to characteristics of the training academy itself.

Discussion

Our study represents the first examination of newly hired individuals' fear of beginning a correctional officer career before and after academy training. Given the many negative factors associated with officers' fear (e.g., PTSD, turnover), the failure of researchers and departments of correction to systematically examine this issue is alarming. Beyond this issue, another important aspect of our study is that it was able to examine whether academy training reduced the level of fear held by newly hired officers. After all, time in the academy presents an opportunity for state departments to dispel the negative myths regularly perpetuated by the media. Moreover, many topics focused on during training should, theoretically, decrease one's fear of working in a prison environment. These consist of defensive tactics, de-escalation skills, and firearms training, as well as effective ways of working with incarcerated persons (Burton et al., 2018; Kois et al., 2020).

Considering these issues, academy training did not significantly reduce everyone's fear of beginning a career as a correctional officer. Specifically, only White trainees' fear was significantly reduced after training. Conversely, no other demographic subgroups experienced a significant reduction in fear as a result of training. This finding is likely a function of corrections staff—including training academy officers—predominantly being White. Recent estimates indicate that White correctional officers outnumber Black officers at a ratio of more than two to one, with 56.9 percent of all correctional officers being White and 24.9 percent being Black (DATA USA, 2022). As such, it might be the case that White trainees resonate more with predominantly White training staff and thus experience a reduction in fear as a result. Below we make three recommendations based on the study's findings.

Recommendations for State Departments of Correction

Due to the inherent danger associated with prison work, correctional officers often

grapple with feelings of fear. Although various factors (e.g., security level and type of institution) can exacerbate fearfulness, one chief influence extends beyond the walls of the facility: the media's portrayal of prisons (Bougadi, 2016; Burton & Jonson, 2023; Gordon & Baker, 2017). Regularly depicting maximum-security institutions, the media depicts prisons as violent, chaotic, and unpredictable entities housing dangerous individuals intent on harming those around them (Bougadi, 2016). Newly recruited correctional officers likely have been exposed to these graphic and sensationalized portrayals and are bound to come into the job with exaggerated trepidation concerning work in a prison. As a result, correctional officer training academies should *explicitly* assess these misconceptions and consciously dismantle these commonly held prison myths to alleviate some of the fear that officers bring with them into the job.

Relatedly, state departments of correction should engage in continual evaluations of officers' fear. As fear is related to a plethora of negative work and personal outcomes (e.g., higher feelings of stress, increased mental health challenges, reduced job satisfaction) (Hartley et al., 2013; James & Today, 2018; Stichman & Gordon, 2015; Taxman & Gordon, 2009), understanding fear in greater detail may allow for interventions to assist in officer well-being and retention (Spinaris, 2020). More specifically, baseline levels of fear should be measured at the start of, during, and after officer training as well as throughout an individual's career as an officer. The focus on assessing fearfulness could be subsumed under the larger and growing umbrella of correctional officer wellness, which seeks to address the multitude of factors that "erode the health of correctional employees" (Spinaris, 2020, p. 8).

Finally, as indicated in our research, as distinct groups, non-White, male, and female trainees did not experience significant reductions in their levels of fear as a result of academy training. With corrections work historically being a White-dominated profession (DATA USA, 2022), many training academy officers are likely White. Furthermore, many scenarios and training materials depict White officers in their examples. As a result, non-White officers (and those from other demographic subgroups) may not see themselves portrayed in examples during their training nor have their culturally related concerns addressed. To facilitate a more inclusive training, there should be a conscious effort

by state departments of correction to employ more diverse training officers and to be receptive to *all* individuals who enter their training academy.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its innovativeness, the current study is not without its limitations. As such, future research should use these findings as a launching point to more holistically understand the impact of fear among newly hired correctional officers and how academy training can mitigate feelings of trepidation. Three such avenues are discussed. First, the current study's data are drawn from three state departments of correction officer training academies in the Midwest and South. With 47 additional state departments of correction, a federal prison system, juvenile correctional settings, and numerous local jails, each having their own unique training requirements, replication efforts should be undertaken to verify these results across various correctional settings. Second, the current study revealed that training academy instruction has disparate effects on fear for White and non-White officers. However, it is beyond the scope of the current study to explain *why* these differences exist. As a result, future research should attempt to uncover what is occurring in the training academy that is differentially impacting newly hired officers of different racial and cultural backgrounds. This is a critical avenue for future research, as understanding the reasons for these differences could lead to more equitable training for all newly hired officers. Moreover, efforts are being made to hire more people of color into law enforcement positions (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). With strong recruitment efforts targeting more diverse individuals, training must become more adaptive and follow suit. Third, the current study only examined global levels of fear before and after the training academy, and thus the enduring effects of fear on the job are not explored. Consequently, longitudinal research is needed to fully explore how incoming, post-training, and on-the-job levels of fear impact officers' work-related behaviors, wellness, and turnover intentions.

Conclusion

Correctional officers are the foundation of any prison, interacting more than any other staff member or administrator with those incarcerated behind the institution's walls (Lombardo, 1981). Since officers face unique challenges

and stressors, effective training and resources must be provided to *all* officers to ensure their health and well-being, including addressing the fear associated with this type of work. The current study's results reveal that training departments are missing a critical opportunity to reduce the fear held by all officers as they leave their academy training and assume their posts in their assigned prisons. By following the recommendations above, it is possible that state departments of correction can reduce the number of newly hired individuals afraid to begin their careers as correctional officers.

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