Article

Invisible ghosts of care and penality: Exploring Canadian correctional workers' perceptions of prisoner well-being, accountability and power

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Abstract

Much correctional work is generally misunderstood by the mainstream media and many public circles as solely punitive and authoritative, which has fueled many politicized outcomes for correctional policy, practice and intervention. Reasonably, critical criminological discourse is steered primarily by the perspectives and voices of prisoners and victims. Yet this privileging leaves many questions remaining about how correctional workers in the contemporary era negotiate their complex duties of both prisoner care and accountability. Drawing on data garnered from open-ended survey responses of provincial and territorial correctional employees (n = 876) in Canada, we explore how Canadian correctional workers balance their emotional and occupational framework and perspectives with integrity. Informed through a lens of emotional labour, we find that many Canadian correctional workers recognize the need for, and gap in, prisoner care, mental health and rehabilitation, while also problematizing the shift and decline in prisoner accountability, which they believe jeopardizes both correctional worker and prisoner safety. We discuss the implications our findings present in relation to questions of power and control in prison spaces.

Keywords

Accountability, correctional workers, emotional labour, mental health, power, prisoners

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Introduction

Much correctional work is simply misunderstood by the mainstream media and many public circles as aggressive, degrading and morally tainted dirty work guided by a punitive and cynical – rather than protective, caring, rehabilitative and managerial – framework (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Crawley, 2004a; Hughes, 1951; Jewkes, 2007; Liebling et al., 2011; Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Tracy, 2004). These widespread and stigmatized (mis)perceptions about the nature and goals of correctional work can fuel toxic assumptions that many correctional workers and scholars argue influence governmental and organizational policy (Finn, 1998; Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Triplett et al., 1996), and not always for the better. As Crewe and levins (2020) recognize, prisons are in our communities, but entirely impacted by political engagement and narratives. In essence they are a reflection of popular thought in society.

However, in addition to public scrutiny, prison environments are known to create many negative emotional challenges for both correctional workers and prisoners (Arnold, 2005; Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Phillips, 2020; Robinson, 2020). These challenges can involve, for both correctional workers and prisoners, intense and reactive feelings because of the nature of confinement and the (sometimes quick, reactive, emergency) decisions that are made within institutional boundaries. They may also experience frustration due to, for prisoners, family separation, and for staff, the idea of bringing home communicational infections; fear and paranoia due to a loss of personal safety; and powerlessness as prisoners and correctional workers struggle and compete to gain a sense of control and autonomy (Crawley, 2004a; Crewe, 2009).

While ideas about power and control from the perspective of prisoners – that is to say, those being confined – in prison spaces have been sufficiently conceptualized since, to name a few, the work of Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961) and Foucault (1977a), much less scholarship has identified and explored the emotional and relational struggles of correctional workers that tend to define and shape relationships between prisoners and staff (Crewe et al., 2014). Correctional workers often *silently* negotiate the many public, political and academic discourses of penality that tend to loudly favour the views and experiences of prisoners (Crawley, 2004a; Gaucher, 2002) and victims (Hall, 2009, 2010), sometimes at the expense of counter-evidence (Newbold and Ross, 2013).

Our aim in the current article is to show how correctional workers in Canada assume a professional role of both prisoner care and accountability as they carry out their complex duties, which in theory and practice are meant to serve, protect and rehabilitate the prisoner population. This orientation represents a shift in correctional philosophy since, at least, the 1990s, where the focus has turned to prisoner rehabilitation and correction, rather than punishment, discipline and the imposition of consequences. Informed through a lens of emotional labour, we aim to capture how Canadian correctional workers balance their emotional and occupational framework and perspectives with integrity. Namely, our findings demonstrate how many respondents recognize the need for, and gap in, prisoner care, mental health and rehabilitation, while also maintaining a position that prisoners must necessarily be held accountable for their actions and behaviours when inside prisons to better promote both correctional worker and prisoner safety and well-being, as broadly defined.

Competing perceptions of the role of correctional workers

Rather than viewing prison life as an opportunity for positive change, reflection and rehabilitation, Scott (2007) conceptualized prisons as fulfilling one clear objective: '. . . its punishment role: the deliberate infliction of suffering and hardships upon those contained within its walls' (p. 49). The idea that prisons do little more than obtain revenge on prisoners for the harms they were found guilty of committing is a powerful – and arguably trending – discourse found in recent social movements, public commentary and some academic research (CPEP, 2022; Drake, 2012; Jewkes, 2008; Sim, 2009). In Canada especially, such a critical perspective has led many to the conclusion that since prisons – and those employed in the sector – primarily reify unjust practices and structures of punishment, prisons cannot be meaningfully reformed and thus should be abolished, with the hope that alternatives largely driven by community involvement and participation will serve as a better replacement and still preserve public safety and offender accountability (Chartrand, 2021; Montford and Taylor, 2021; Piché and Larsen, 2010).

This position raises a number of questions and tensions; namely, are prisons in fact solely punitive or do they also facilitate the advancement of social justice and rehabilitation (see Bucerius et al., 2021; Tomczak and Thompson, 2019)? If it is the latter, what implications follow in terms of how we ought to view and understand correctional staff? In Canada, Bucerius et al. (2021) wrote about the federal prison serving as a space for the temporary refuge of women – is such a reality possible if prisons are entirely punitive? Others in Canada have written about the compromised mental health and well-being of Canadian correctional workers, their rehabilitative orientation and their role in correctional rehabilitation – countering the perception of prison work as punitive (Carleton et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ricciardelli et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Scott (2007: 51) lamented over how prisons in the United Kingdom and Wales, despite having a rehabilitative framework and orientation, were instead driven by staff practices of 'brutality' meant to ensure that

> the upper margins of prison conditions are guaranteed not to rise above the worst material conditions in society as a whole and that, in times of social hardship, the rigours of penal discipline [would] become more severe to prevent the weakening [of] its deterrent effect. (Scott, 2007: 51)

Other research on correctional workers has focused on describing an employee and prison culture that is marked by security concerns, intensive surveillance, power, hypermasculinity, punitive values and a distancing from rehabilitation (Compton and Brandhorst, 2021; Jewkes, 2005; Tracy and Scott, 2006; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat, 2009).

Although interesting, the idea that contemporary or even past correctional workers prioritize(d) the deliverance of punishment over rehabilitation, as though punishment would deter future offences more than positive change within the individual, is a simplistic characterization. Perhaps the characterization held true historically, but in contemporary scholarship in Canadian and international studies of correctional workers, researchers have nuanced the concept such that correctional work appears more complex, less

punitive and laced with compassion. For example, Maier's (2020) Canadian study found that some correctional workers at halfway houses perceived their work as against punitive impulses and more towards rehabilitation. Other researchers reveal how prison educators help prisoners to rebuild their values and identities in positive ways promoting self-reflection, personal growth and pro-social interaction (Szifris, 2021). Earlier work also highlighted the nuanced ways correctional workers balance their power with peace-keeping work and the use of discretion (Liebling et al., 1999), or the promotion of health (Samele et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding these distinctions and differences in how correctional work plays out in prison settings, Canada has been accused of adopting a correctional framework that, since 2006, draws on and mobilizes 'American' discourses that pit 'those who commit offences [as] inherently "bad" people and qualitatively difference from "ordinary law-abiding" Canadians' (Webster and Doob, 2015: 299). Some of the changes made to our criminal justice system by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government (2006–2015) have been overshadowed by progressive mandates adopted by the current federal government of Canada. The Harper government's platform included mandatory minimum prison sentences, intolerance for law breaking, and overall more 'tough on crime' legislation (i.e. Bill C-10, n.d.).

We do not contest that politics and ideologies about imprisonment will always shape prison outcomes, which are subject to change – both positive or negative – and often re-directed through sensationalized and publicized events that occur inside prisons. As Sparkes et al. (2016) wrote,

> Indeed, it has historically been a frequent lament of prison reformers and penal practitioners that politicians, journalists and the general public are characteristically not very interested in prisons unless and until things go sharply and visibly wrong . . . there is little natural sympathy for prisoners – and perhaps not for their custodians either – in most quarters. (p. 55)

However, this position reveals a distinction between the often emotional-reactive and *everyday* realities of prison life, which we seek to explore further in this study, from the perspective of correctional workers. In the next section, we flesh out how emotions – as a distinct component of correctional workers' labour – factor into the perceptions and practices of correctional work.

Emotional labour in prisons

Correctional workers, and correctional officers in particular, must manage their emotions and the emotions of prisoners in the most context-sensitive, appropriate, professional way possible (Liebling et al., 2011). The complicated process of 'working' through one's emotions and adapting to the norms and mandates of one's work environment has been coined in the scholarly literature as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild (1983) described how emotional labour is more than an exchange of emotional regulation for a wage. Rather, emotional labour is intertwined by informal/formal regulations, workplace norms, rules, and values that, for correctional workers especially, sometimes demand great effort or 'deep acting' to engage with success.

Such a cumbersome process can trigger experiences of staff discomfort, exhaustion, cynicism and emotional strain (Nylander and Bruhn, 2020). As Sykes (1958) documented, correctional workers are not agents of totalizing systems of power, control and punishment. Their job historically has been to maintain order in the prison and rehabilitate, protect and, as legally defined but also often as socially understood, care for prisoners (Hemmens and Stohr, 2000; Tait, 2008; Tracy and Scott, 2006). Their mandate and organizational framework, although it does not always materialize perfectly and can become entangled by systematic or individual punitive impulses (Crawley, 2004b; Garland, 2001), has not changed in provincial and territorial correctional services in Canada. The goal of correctional workers remains by and large to build good relationships with prisoners and each other on a daily basis, while they become and remain embedded in a complex prison culture that demands emotional labour and workplace performance (Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Nylander et al., 2011).

How correctional workers manage proper emotional responses in prison settings is often strategic. Crawley (2004a) finds that some correctional officers are able to establish and solidify a working group emotional framework in how they socialize or banter with their colleagues. Crawley (2004b) also describes how some backstage spaces in prison serve as a buffer zone to let off steam, engage in acts of dark humour or temporarily let go of their professional, front-stage emotional personality. Tracy's (2004) research on US correctional officers identifies that some correctional officers may build emotional identities around suspicion, not taking things personally, following rules with discretion, withdrawing and detaching socially or building an 'us vs them' attitude towards prisoners. In other studies, researchers have found that when periods of relaxation with their peers (backstage performance) have ended because prisoners or workplace obligations require their presence on the floor, they are usually pressured to switch back to their professional demeanour (Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Nylander et al., 2011).

The management, performance and regulation of the many difficult emotions that accompany correctional work is not without its physical, social and psychological consequences. A large and emerging body of scholarship clearly indicates that both international and Canadian correctional workers experience workplace stressors that negatively impact their well-being and mental health. These impacts include, but are not limited to, occupational stress injuries, disproportionately high rates of mental health disorders (e.g. Major Depressive Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) and sometimes regular exposure to potentially psychologically traumatic events such as prisoner violence, self-harm, harassment, threats to their families or death (Barry, 2017; Carleton et al., 2020a, 2020b; Denhof and Spinaris, 2013; Genest et al., 2021; James and Todak, 2018; James et al., 2017; Norman and Ricciardelli, 2022; Ricciardelli and Perry, 2016; Ricciardelli et al., 2020a, 2020b; Viotti, 2016; Walker et al., 2017). If left untreated by mental health professionals, the repercussions these deteriorating and dangerous conditions can also cause include hypersensitivity to events happening around them, hypervigilance, distrust of others, apathy towards seeking mental health treatment, desensitization to critical incidents and disillusionment – all of which can carry over negatively into their personal lives (McKendy et al., 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2020a).

While a cumbersome process, researchers highlight how correctional workers in Canada work through and navigate their complicated emotions, perspectives and work

experiences that at times discursively competes with their own occupational framework and practical realities and expectations of their job. As we discuss, such a complex presence of reflexive agency rivals largely public discourses that stigmatize and generalize correctional workers as unquestioning enforcers and abusers of hierarchical power and authority.

Method

We surveyed correctional employees working in provincial or territorial correctional services, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, using a web-based self-report survey available in English or French. In the current article, we analyse qualitative, open-ended survey responses from 876 participants[1] who responded to the item, 'Please tell us what changes in your current work environment could have a positive impact on your mental health' from the provinces of Manitoba (n = 357), Saskatchewan (n = 366), Nova Scotia (n = 84), New Brunswick (n = 15), Newfoundland (n = 31) and the Yukon Territory (n = 23). In other work (Johnston et al., 2022), we analysed the specific policies and best practices respondents identified that would promote mental health and well-being in their workplace. In the current article, we build on that study by focusing our analysis on responses which elaborated on the more (stigmatizing) political, public and institutional frictions that, while possibly influencing policy outcomes, also cause correctional workers to feel misunderstood, and less safe in their occupation. Respondents include correctional and probation officers, managers, administrators, nurses, teachers and other employees within community, administrative and institutional correctional services.

Ministerial correctional and union representatives contacted participants via their email listserv to invite them to participate in an anonymous and confidential online survey in 2018 and 2019. All surveys closed prior to/or at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon receipt of the circulated survey email, interested respondents were provided with a link that directed them to the project consent form, research information page and survey. Participation was voluntary and the survey could be completed during paid work hours. If desired, participants could elect to finish the survey over multiple sessions, and the survey took approximately between 25 and 40 minutes on average to complete. Research ethics boards at the University of Regina and Memorial University of Newfoundland approved the study.

Responses pertaining to the open-ended question under analysis varied in length, from a few words to several paragraphs. Using NVivo, we coded the data using a constructed semi-grounded emergent theme approach that involved transforming codes into primary, secondary and tertiary themes (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data were then grouped into one document and discussed by the research team to get a sense of the data as a whole and to identify significant themes across responses (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Our results section showcases selected and representative quotations that illustrate the concrete themes and voices of respondents. Without compromising meaning or tone, the quotations we cite have undergone minor edits, without impacting vernacular, to correct spelling and grammar for readability.

Two methodological limitations are worthy of mention. First, we can only analyse the information presented to us anonymously in the survey by participants; thus, we could

not probe respondents for additional information or clarity. As the nature of any qualitative analysis is interpretative, there may be discrepancy between the intended meanings of respondents and the meanings we ascribe to their words. We mitigated this limitation by collaboratively discussing the data until we arrived at an agreement over the applied meanings. Second, the sampling frame, due to the overlap between institutional and union listservs, cannot be determined. Thus, we cannot confirm a response rate for survey participants. Despite these limitations, we believe that having the private space to elaborate on a sensitive topic provided respondents with both flexibility and time to write about their experiences.

Results

Prisoner well-being ⟵⟶ Correctional worker well-being

Many correctional workers identified that improving rehabilitative, recreational and mental health care for prisoners or probationers would reduce struggles and conflict among both staff and clients/prisoners. Some of their words illustrate the compassion they feel towards prisoners who do not receive the 'help' they need, be it mental health care, programming, vocational training and/or addiction support, while incarcerated. For example, P376 wrote that 'Knowing the clients are getting more help while incarcerated' (Correctional Coordinator, Saskatchewan) was necessary for the well-being of those living under the control of correctional services. However, when there is little help, participants feel their clients become frustrated, and in consequence, may at times take out their pains against the people in charge of their safety, protection and rehabilitation.

Misperceptions and assumptions that Canadian prisons are punishment-only institutions that mirror US penal systems and those who work in these settings contribute, intentionally or unintentionally, to system-wide hyper-accountability practices have spread far into public communities (Walby and Piché, 2015; Webster and Doob, 2015). Discourses especially found in research that pit correctional officers or wardens in particular as violent, sadistic, invasive, power-hungry agents of accountability out to punish and degrade prisoners (Balfour, 2018: 153; Walby et al., 2018: 7–8) permeate the learning environments of some undergraduate and graduate programmes in Canada. We are not arguing that such perspectives are wrong, as we appreciate the positioning, and believe such positions are necessary, but we also see a space for balance that is highlighted by the words of our participants who do care about those in custody or under community supervision. Here, we recognize that people are different and dominant correctional worker typologies may not do justice to the variation among staff.

Prisons, generally speaking, do reproduce problematic norms and inequalities related to gender, race, class, ability and so forth (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Britton, 2003; Davis and Gibson-Light, 2020; Garland, 2020), and sometimes prisoner abuses happen and are driven by these discursive social forces (Davis, 2003; Kilty and Lehalle, 2019; Solinger et al., 2010). However, the fact remains that voices such as the one documented above belonging to the Correctional Coordinator from Saskatchewan demonstrate that some correctional workers do see their role as caring, even potentially rehabilitative, rather than punitive. In fact, many respondents are acutely aware of the struggles some Canadian

correctional institutions encounter when trying to address and respond to prisoners' mental health and rehabilitative needs.

To elaborate, some respondents specifically indicated that a rise in prisoner mental health and rehabilitation/recreational programmes could mean a rise in correctional worker mental health, safety and morale:

> More programming and programmers for the women offenders. More units open to spread out the women offenders. More mental health services for women offenders. Better court services, for example, more use of online video court so that offenders are not transported in vans for hours and in bad weather conditions. The basic idea is that if the women offenders are easier to deal with because they are kept busy doing constructive activities then the work environment is positive for the correctional officers. (P19, Correctional Officer, New Brunswick)

> If we actually did contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders. We say we do things but we don't. For instance, we don't have any programs for sex offenders and we lie and say that we do. I feel that if we actually followed what we say we do, we could have a positive impact on my mental health. I feel like a fraud working in corrections because we don't follow our own core values, mission, vision and ethical framework. (P292, Correctional Officer, Saskatchewan)

> Space for inside and outside rec for inmates, space for programs for inmates would improve everybody's situation. (P82, Correctional Officer, Newfoundland)

The first excerpt from the Correctional Officer in New Brunswick asserts that meaningful changes to the accommodation practices of women prisoners' mental health needs, recreational activities, geographical lay-out of the prison, and court services would make the working environment safer and more positive for correctional officers. The Officer also shares concerns for the safety of women prisoners and believes that their boredom – due to a lack of programming – and shortage of accommodations are not conducive to a healthy living environment and prisoner management, instead creating opportunities for interpersonal conflict due to boredom and idle time.

The second excerpt from the Correctional Officer in Saskatchewan perceives a discrepancy in how their institution visibly embraces the rehabilitation of prisoners, but does not always follow-through with their established framework. Consequently, this correctional worker feels that they are not serving the prisoners to the extent they should, which has negative implications for their mental health. The third quotation from the Correctional Officer in Newfoundland iterates that recreational activities that allow prisoners to enjoy themselves and improve relationships with one another would foster a healthier institutional environment. The Officer laments that throughout the winter months, prisoners at Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's, NL, do not go outside, they receive no fresh air and are confined to a deplorable, decaying prison environment (see Decades of Darkness Report, 2008). Among all passages, there is a clear call to address the systematic barriers of their institution by responding to the rehabilitative, recreational and health needs of prisoners, which several respondents believe would make their job easier, improve the lives of prisoners and thus improve their own mental health, well-being and morale.

In a work environment where correctional workers must deal with prisoner conflict and negativity, too often regularly, blaming prisoners for their mental health challenges and other repercussions faced due to such friction is easy. However, respondents continued to point to systematic barriers that inhibit prisoner safety and well-being as the source of their own unease, tension and lack of wellness:

> Address our physician over booking his clinics (35–40 people) to be seen in 3 hours is inappropriate and unmanageable. Our psychiatrist's attitude and negative comments towards nurses needs to be addressed as well as his frequent cancellation of clinics. (P360, Correctional Nurse, Saskatchewan)

> If the ministry stopped trying to blame and discipline staff for institutional deaths. Better ethical practices with some of our doctors that we have to work with. (P140, Correctional Nurse, Saskatchewan)

The first passage from the Correctional Nurse from Saskatchewan recognizes the toxicity that can develop between healthcare workers when there is serious mental health patient overflow occurring. Such demands placed on the prison mental health system can overwhelm staff and may result in serious mental health problems remaining unresolved and untreated, which only further exacerbates the negative environment of many prisons. The other Correctional Nurse from Saskatchewan points to an inadequate ethics of care possibly shaping nurse–patient–doctor relations. They problematize that even amid structural constraints, they are often the ones responsibilized for prisoner deaths, which we explore further in the next analytical section.

Unlike Correctional Nurses or other healthcare professionals, many correctional workers do not have the mental health training and education needed to adequately meet the mental health needs of prisoners. One respondent voiced their concern of being forced to 'play Doctor' with a population that, in their purview, has many mental health needs requiring address:

> Real mental health professionals to look after mentally ill clients instead of staff having to try and play Doctor. We are not qualified to handle the level of mental illness that we have here. Maybe have the 'leaders' show their faces within the secure perimeter and lead by example when creating ways to manage difficult inmates and actually meeting with these inmates in person instead of using papers and officers as a buffer zone. (P33, Correctional Officer, Yukon)

Beyond Correctional Officers not having the capacity to meet the healthcare and social work needs of prisoners, P33 also describes how the burden of care is sometimes imposed on front-line workers without much active, visible support from management or mental health training. They suggest that a stronger managerial presence among the prisoner population, especially when there is conflict present, would help facilitate a team approach to handling disagreements and outbursts, and possibly offset the perceived lack of qualified mental health personnel in some provincial or territorial facilities.

A Programme Director from Saskatchewan echoed the need for supervising staff to be more present when dealing with prisoner conflict:

> Supervising staff that want to be here to assist inmates resolve issues. Staff should be doing their case work and treating them like people versus the way some COs treat inmates. (P419, Program Director, Saskatchewan)

The Programme Director recognizes that sometimes the problem in trying to resolve prisoner conflict is the attitude of some staff, rather than the prisoners. These findings emphasize the on-going reflexive capacities of some correctional workers to identify how they need to improve their attitudes and practices to facilitate a pro-social, beneficial prison environment. In the next section, we explore some of the ways correctional workers call for and identify better prisoner accountability practices that could work – with tension – in tandem with better prisoner programming to improve correctional workers' safety, working environment, morale and mental health.

Prisoner accountability = Prisoner and correctional worker safety

Many respondents acknowledged that prisoner mental health, recreation and rehabilitation are invaluable, mandated principles in provincial and territorial correctional services that, if addressed, would help prisoners and simultaneously reduce the burden on correctional workers. That said, many correctional workers pointed to institutional problems with maintaining prisoner accountability, especially when they become violent or harassing to staff or other prisoners:

> Loosen up rules on segregation so that we can more safely manage the most violent, unpredictable inmates instead of throwing them into general population and waiting for them to kill someone. (P48, Probation Officer, Manitoba)

> Inmates are properly given consequences to their actions. (P170, Correctional Officer, Manitoba)

> Stop treating inmates better than Officers . . . If I get assaulted by a violent inmate, I am worried about whether management will ask me why I provoked them vs. asking me if I am ok. (P190, Clerk, Manitoba)

> More support by the province for tougher discipline of inmates. (P17, Correctional Officer, Nova Scotia)

These correctional workers point to the fear of their loss of power to discipline and contain prisoners whom they perceive to be dangerous. Well recognized is how prisoners, not staff, control the institution (Bosworth, 1999; Crewe, 2009; Roger, 2009). The – sometimes gendered and racialized (Prevost and Kilty, 2020) – use of either administrative or punitive segregation to manage violent, aggressive or at-risk prisoners has been sharply critiqued by socio-legal scholars and the wider network of critical criminologists for its vicious and deteriorating impact on prisoner mental health (e.g. onset of psychotic symptoms), especially if the period of segregation is administered for long periods of time (Kupers et al., 2009; Richards and Newbold, 2015). Prisoners enduring solitary confinement can also experience disruptions to their sense of time and spatiality, which

triggers multifarious resistance strategies and outbursts aimed at recollecting or reestablishing identity (Martel, 2006). Nevertheless, the Probation Officer from Manitoba points to a social problem sparked by the stricter regulations in how segregation can be administered, albeit sometimes punitively: correctional workers fear more for their lives and the lives of other prisoners.

The second excerpt of the Correctional Officer from Manitoba implies that there has been a decline in prisoners being 'properly' held accountable for their poor decisions. Said differently, they believe their authority to respond to aggressive acts of prisoners has diminished and instead the correctional worker will experience repercussions due to the prisoner's actions. This feeling is also put forth by P17, in the third excerpt, who describes how some correctional workers perceive their roles in the prison as being somewhat reversed, as they raise a concern with how some managers may assume that assaults on staff are the fault of the victim(s) and not the perpetrator(s). For many years, a criminological literature has insisted that the social, cultural, colonial and architectural structures of prisons fuel violence in these settings, and therefore, they are to blame, rather than the individuals responsible for enacting such violence (Edgar et al., 2011; Evans, 2021; Michalski, 2017; Scraton and McCulloch, 2009; Trammell, 2012; Wooldredge, 2020). We do not dispute this claim, but instead, we show the nuance; for instance, the fourth quotation suggests that such a positioning has moved beyond the scholarly community and has influenced the position of some provincial or territorial governments. These passages ask readers to think critically about these solidified discourses and the decision-making capacities of prisoners who, while living in a deprived and arguably harsh setting, still can make choices that inflict harm and jeopardize the safety of those around them. As a Team Leader from Saskatchewan indicates, such critical and empathetic thinking could generate 'more understanding from policymakers' (P255).

Other correctional workers expressed their dismay over the misperceptions many people in the public carry about the dangerous nature of their work, and blamed these widely held misunderstandings on the perpetual negative press they receive:

> More reasonable use of Segregation and Secure Living Unit for dangerous individuals. When staff assaults happen, the inmate who assaults staff needs to be sent to a more secure area (SEG/SLU) and stay there – there should be zero tolerance for staff assaults. Management and Department of Justice (DOJ) could release positive press releases to counter the constant smearing we receive from the news. (P51, Correctional Officer, Yukon)

> Better recognition from the public and government leaders. Better pay. More punishment to inmates for bad/threatening behaviour. (P44, Probation Officer, Manitoba)

> Keep inmates accountable – more transparent to the public so they can see the abuse we take from inmates. (P314, Correctional Officer, Manitoba)

When a prisoner is seriously harmed in prison, it is often reported by Canadian Press, which fairly produces and disseminates in the public critical perceptions and discussions about prison conditions (Bueckert, 2020; Warnica, 2017). Less common though are media releases documenting the number of times correctional workers save the lives of

prisoners (Ricciardelli et al., 2020a, 2020b), or are physically/verbally assaulted or harassed by prisoners, although this is a known and problematic phenomenon documented in extant realist-criminological literature on the experiences of correctional workers in Canada and around the globe (Alink et al., 2014; Boudoukha et al., 2013; Cashmore et al., 2012; Ricciardelli et al., 2018). These correctional workers are asking the public for more understanding in terms of the work they endure, and the conflicts they must try to resolve and deescalate. As P49, a Correctional Officer from the Yukon Territory, further elaborates, 'not letting public opinion dictate policy' may produce fairer policies and practices in prisons that try to strike a balance between prisoner and correctional worker safety, accountability and rehabilitation.

Again, it must be acknowledged that prisons are part of our communities but informed by political engagement – the tension arises in that political engagement results in the prison conditions so many oppose and advocate against. Correctional workers believe that critical commentary spread by the public and the subsequent, influenced actions taken by elected officials have made their working environment less safe. One respondent described these tensions:

> At this point in my career, the prisoners hold all the power. They receive minimal to no disciplinary infractions. They complain about being locked in their cell and the provincial government quivers in fear of a bad write up in the newspaper. The provincial government is also forcing staff to sit inside the living units with up to 56 inmates. They call this 'direct supervision', this concept started back in the 80s and was designed for minimum risk inmates. I should note that is ruining corrections across the country. Staff assaults are through the roof and we get harassed by an outside agency to scare us back to work. Workplace mental health is going to continue to plummet in the direct supervision environment where the inmates run the jail. (P20, Correctional Officer, Nova Scotia)

The Correctional Officer from Nova Scotia believes that the loss and exchange of power from correctional workers to prisoners occurred because of the political fear public and media resistance imposed on their provincial government. Some might suggest that the social change generated by activism and commentary is the very point of such pressure and political resistance. However, the Correctional Officer counters this implication by presenting us with a workplace problem that has been imposed on many correctional workers as a result of the power-sedating effect created from widespread public disjuncture. The problem is that prisoners are no longer held accountable for their problematic behaviour against staff who, like prisoners, are contained and trapped in prison settings for extended periods of time, though not because they were convicted of a criminal offence(s),[2] but because they took on a job that, in theory, is meant to serve and protect our communities – they are peace officers, public servants and many are first responders.

Even more specifically, the Correctional Officer describes how prisoner complaints about being confined to their cells, which is the very punitive and symbolic fabric and tradition of prisons, have caused prisons to change such that the Correctional Officer feels that they have no power to control and hold accountable prisoners. The reality operates in conjunction with the fact the Correctional Officers must still 'directly supervise' a high number of prisoners disproportionate to the number of staff present, which they

believe have caused an increase in staff assaults. Correctional workers reluctant to continue working in this dangerous environment then receive pressure from external organizations to return to work, although concerning workplace conditions are seldom addressed, often a result of resource limitations and political interests.

The rippling effects of political resistance and critical discussion by former prisoners, activists and journalists were further problematized by other respondents:

> How politics plays a big role in how we have enabled our clients [to be] a very needy population. (P10, Manager, Yukon)

> Corrections and policing are tough jobs and officers are always under the microscope internal and externally. (P18, Supervisor, Yukon)

> Less changes to policy, less fear mongering about inmate deaths, more autonomy, more ability to lock doors, more ability to consequence inmates, less focus on minor/silly things such as taking last names off white boards, wearing nametags, 15 minute checks, and more focus on employee safety and success. (P373, Youth Worker, Saskatchewan)

These correctional workers express that a detachment is present between what the public perceives the role of correctional workers to be, and how correctional workers actually experience their roles, duties and workplace environment. Whatever is the reality, the Manager from the Yukon Territory describes frustration with how political struggle has 'enabled' prisoners to be held less accountable and responsible for their behaviour and rehabilitation inside the prison, a fact that also challenges victim rights advocates and various publics (Gottschalk, 2006). The Supervisor from the Yukon Territory further elaborates that, inversely, their position is highly accountable to the public and suggests that the scrutiny they receive over their actions or lack of actions within the institution makes their jobs especially 'tough'. Correctional worker accountability needs to be present, since they are responsible for the safety and security of people incarcerated or working inside prisons. However, the question these correctional workers raise is: can they fairly be held accountable if prisoners themselves are no longer or rarely held accountable?

The struggle between these two competing dispositions likely encouraged the Youth Worker from Saskatchewan to call for a reversal in policy changes within the prison that have taken away correctional worker autonomy to secure prisoners when a safety issue is present. Another tension in their comment is their emphasis on 'less fear mongering about inmate deaths'. When a prisoner dies within the custody of correctional workers, many questions are raised surrounding their competency, (in)action and judgement. Notorious cases exist in Canada where prisoners have died in custody because of the improper decisions and actions taken by correctional workers and senior officials.[3] However, this Youth Worker may be speaking to the fact that these cases are not necessarily representative of the precise, day-to-day nature of correctional work in Canada, but the 'fear mongering' that is triggered by these national, emotional, disturbing cases has led to widespread beliefs that correctional workers are responsible for prisoner deaths – although, as they complain, policies meant to protect prisoners from harm or

murder by other prisoners have been softened. Correctional work is one of the only professions where client/prisoner death by suicide is considered an occupational failure and the responsibility of staff.

P134, an Institutional Manager from Manitoba, described the moral tension they endure when correctional workers are blamed for their treatment of prisoners, rather than the public and justice system critically and empathetically understanding their disposition: 'a Justice System that cares about victims and innocent civilians and not these rapist and pedo losers'. Such anger, resentment and judgement were found in other survey responses: 'Bring back the death penalty' (P365, Correction Officer, Saskatchewan). It is easy to problematize positions that enable a 'tough on crime' agenda; however, these concerns shed light on the frustration some correctional workers experience as they do their best to help rehabilitate and protect prisoners, while managing the widespread heat and negative press they receive from the public, media and government officials when a tragic or unfortunate incident occurs under their watch. Further exacerbating the problem is that correctional workers are bound by law to protect the confidentiality of prisoners and thus cannot remark on events that occurred within the prisons. They have no voice and cannot defend or explain their actions publicly, thus leaving them to hold a scapegoat position and be subject to public anger and, at times, aggression and judgement with prejudice.

Some respondents also indicated that their managers, who likely understand their job better than external officials, journalists and academics, they feel, are beginning to side with prisoners when conflicts emerge:

> Have more support from management, inmates have all the rights and management jumps on the staff. (P406, Correctional Officer, Manitoba)

> If managers supported us instead of offenders when they are clearly in the wrong. We are in the business of changing behaviours but they are never tested on how their programming has benefitted them. (P73, Correctional Officer, Saskatchewan)

The Correctional Officer from Manitoba problematizes how some correctional managers' approaches to resolving conflict between prisoners and front-line staff seem to protect the rights of prisoners, but not the rights belonging to correctional workers, which raises the question, is it possible to do both? The Correctional Officer from Saskatchewan describes how siding with prisoners can occur even if the evidence heavily favours the correctional worker, which implies that political divisions have moved beyond the public sphere and actually infiltrated institutional practices and social relations. Moreover, they believe that the rehabilitative programmes offered to prisoners are not evaluated enough in terms of their efficacy and demonstrates the compassion and concern many correctional workers share towards the people whom they are entrusted to care for and protect.

Discussion

Correctional work, in institutions or the community, involves emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Nylander et al., 2011). Complicating the emotional work is the occupational obligation for staff to provide care, custody and

control for those under their supervision. Such a process can, and often does, mandate building rapport with colleagues and prisoners as well as learning about the risks and needs of those under their supervision and care (Crawley, 2004a, 2004b). In consequence, not only is emotional labour involved in occupational responsibilities but emotions can simultaneously create and strategically mitigate tensions while also leaving workers more vulnerable to being harmed.

Our respondents described engaging in emotional labour; for instance, in their expressed desire for more programming and rehabilitative efforts for those in custody. Included here are calls from staff for more mental health supports for criminalized people with such needs. Yet entangling these humanist recognitions of the deficits augmenting the Canadian correctional system is a complex emotional space, where many correctional workers feel villainized by public presentations and discourses around correctional work, which do not, by and large, justly align with their approach to the occupational work. Moreover, these negative conceptualizations of correctional workers tend to create vulnerabilities, such as risk of actions being publicly misinterpreted and negatively construed and disseminated widely, when staff try to hold prisoners or probationers accountable for their actions that sometimes jeopardizes the safety, dignity and lives of staff and other prisoners – all of whom it is within their legislated mandate to protect from harm.

Respondents further described a work environment where they were vulnerable due to an increasing inability to hold prisoners and probationers accountable. Although not a new concern, the sentiment requires unpacking because, particularly in prison settings, the sheer ratio of prisoners to staff clearly supports the idea that prisoners, more than staff, have control and power in the institution (Bosworth, 1999; Crewe, 2009; Roger, 2009). It is thus on the onus of prisoners to conform to, and peacefully negotiate, the rules and regulations around prison life and living. Correctional staff will try to encourage conformity, but are occupationally mandated to police recalcitrant actions, to ensure that the prison environment remains as secure and orderly as possible.

Here, some staff lamented over recent changes in correctional policy, such as the removal of segregation in the federal prison system and the pressure to follow suit in the provincial and territorial systems, that they view as often political in their germination. We are not advocating for or supporting the increased use of segregation. Rather, we are empirically presenting the voices of staff who are asking for a way to deescalate situations and have access to a safe venue to remove prisoners from adverse situations when it is in their best interests (e.g. for their safety, security, protection). The removal of segregation is not the problem. The challenge is in the lack of alternative practices for deescalation and prisoner/staff protection, an area which remains at best, understudied, and at worst, intentionally ignored and condemned as a futile 'reformist' practice, despite the potential for such policies to protect people – in the 'here and now' – from harm or death.

Another way to unpack the aforementioned challenges is to consider power dynamics in prisons. Many concerns raised around care, custody and control direct us to interrogate sociological questions of power: Who should have power in a prison? How much power is 'too much' or 'not enough'? What happens when staff mandated with authority over prisoners lose their power to control the prisoner population? Or, for that matter, has such power ever truly existed? What are the physical and social costs of prisoner resistance?

Does an absence of power in prisoners and/or staff mean their environment is always/already potentially abusive and dangerous?

As Deleuze (1983) points out, even acts of power, domination and subjugation result in new interpretations, which can be mobilized to reveal a particular complexity about the forces which are already in possession of the object. Every force is related to another force; every will is necessarily exercised on another will and is not an *involuntary* process; this is the principle of Nietzsche's philosophy of nature. When there is a will to command or obey, there is a creation of hierarchy (dominant and dominated force), which Deleuze (1983: 8) identifies as the problem inherent in nature: 'life struggled with another kind of life', or more simply, as Foucault (1977b) describes in his work on counter-conduct, power with and alongside resistance.

Thus, the social problem of power and resistance in prisons is not a static force we can abolish, but a diffuse force we must constantly work through, negotiate and recirculate in both confined spaces and everyday life. This process, we have argued, cannot effectively materialize without taking seriously the – often silenced – voices and experiences of correctional workers. Overall, essential is future research that disentangles the broader questions of problems associated with prisons more generally and the strain prisons place on prisoners and correctional workers. Researchers may wish to unpack the essence that prison systems themselves have some inherent fault lines that mean staff can rarely feel they are making a difference, while prisoners often do not have their lives changed in positive or meaningful ways by being sentenced to prison – the question being – how can such a tension be resolved? Thus, future work is necessary that recognizes shortcoming with prison work and living, but also is invested in considering new ways forward.

Conclusion

In the current study, we have cautiously transgressed typical criminological episteme and inversely privileged Canadian correctional workers' purviews, voices, emotions, struggles, ideas and experiences with/about prison life. Many of our respondents draw some of the same conclusions as scholars dedicated to studying punishment and institutional life from the perspective of those experiencing the deprivation of liberty. First, respondents across provinces and territories acknowledge the crisis of prisoner mental health and lament over the lack of adequate remedy, noting that such a deficit jeopardizes the safety and well-being of both staff and prisoners. Second, participants call for more rehabilitation programmes that fulfil correctional services' mandate to address prisoners' diverse needs and, if possible, pave the way for their successful and eventual reintegration into the outside world. Third, correctional workers desire the availability of more prisoner recreational programmes that make life easier and safer for prisoners and staff, which they believe will brighten their living and working conditions.

Yet alongside these concerns for prisoners, they, quite understandably, denounce politicized policies, activism and public perceptions that work to transfer *more* power to prisoners, disregard pleas for prisoner accountability, ignore their work experiences, potentially psychological or physical traumas or mental health needs and ultimately, make their working environments more dangerous than they already are. Our research has demonstrated that Canadian correctional workers, as invisible ghosts of care and

penality (see Liebling, 2000) working within the ontologically confining spaces of both institutions and the current, polarized political landscape, though less seen, are not silenced. In the face of social, political and professional risk, adversity, turmoil and vulnerability, their courage to speak, which is the very spark and fabric of any progressive, evidence-based movement, should be applauded.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. A total of 1999 correctional workers completed the survey, and of these people, 876 responded to the question under study.
2. Wrongful convictions do occur in Canada (Anderson and Anderson, 1998; Roach, 2012); thus, we acknowledge that not every person experiencing incarceration is guilty of the wrongdoings they were accused of, and that this unfortunate reality is especially prevalent among prisoners entangled by the social forces of race, gender, class, ability and so on (Campbell, 2018).
3. For example, the death of Ashley Smith was ruled as a homicide in 2013 by the Chief Coroner of Ontario 'because correctional officers followed a standing order from senior officials not to intervene while she tied ligatures around her neck and slowly suffocated' (Kerr, 2017: 188). Before her death, Smith was held for nearly a year in the harsh conditions of administrative segregation, despite suffering from multiple vulnerabilities.

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