

Corrections Officer Turnover at Marquette Branch Prison During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses and organizations saw significant turnover rates, and in the field of corrections, the situation was no different. This case study will review and interpret the work environmental factors that led to the resignation of corrections officers at the Marquette Branch Prison between April 1, 2020, and April 1, 2022, as there was a significant increase in resignations as well as violent assaults on employees during this time. The objective of this study is to explore the perspectives and experiences of resigned corrections officers to identify the reasoning behind their resignations and to suggest possible strategies to reduce turnover rates, improve employee working conditions, and improve the well-being of corrections officers at Marquette Branch Prison. This project is significant because it gives corrections officers who left their jobs a chance to talk about their experience, identify factors that lead to poor working conditions and decreased employee well-being, and it allows for suggestions of ways to improve work environment conditions, job satisfaction, and employee wellness. There are few similar studies available, and this will be the first research that looks at turnover at a specific prison facility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Marquette Branch Prison is a large employer in its community, and understanding the effect that its work environment has on employees—who are community members—and their families is essential.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, corrections officers experienced an increase in an already stressful profession due to various factors such as an increased shortage in staffing, increases in assaults on staff, seeing people become ill and die from COVID-19, and experiencing strict workplace protocols such as mask enforcement, daily testing, and lockdowns. This research project is titled Corrections Officer Turnover at Marquette Branch Prison during the COVID-19 Pandemic and was conducted by Amanda (Mandy) Bonesteel, a sociology undergraduate at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan, and was a case study consisting of nine resigned COs who left their positions at the Marquette Branch Prison (MBP) in Marquette, Michigan, during the COVID-19 pandemic between April 1, 2020, and April 1, 2022. This study will look at the negative effects that working as a CO during the COVID-19 pandemic has had on those who worked at MBP. The researcher was interested in the social factors and institutional impact on COs as a result of a changing employment environment caused by COVID-19 combined with the work environment of MBP specifically.

Built in 1889, MBP is a state prison located in Marquette, a community of roughly 30,000 inhabitants in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and houses minimum and maximum security inmates (Marquette Branch Prison, n.d.). There is little information or working knowledge on corrections officer experiences and resignation during the pandemic, and this will be the first case study directly working with former COs from MBP to explore their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study intends to identify the work environment problems that occurred at MBP during the COVID-19 pandemic between April 1, 2020, and April 1, 2022, that lead to the resignation of COs by looking at the impact of the work environment during this period on employee well-being and COs' reasons for resigning. The researcher makes suggestions for policy and procedure changes that address the problems identified by the study participants for the purpose of improving future employee retention, safety, and wellness.

Literature Review Overview of Marquette Branch Prison

MBP employs over 300 personnel, and this facility contains four level-I (minimum security) units and six level-V (maximum security) units and can house roughly 1,100 adult male inmates. This facility sits on a three-acre tract of land and is located about two and a half miles south of downtown Marquette, Michigan. For comparison, the G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan, houses roughly 1,850 inmates, the most in the state, making the Marquette Branch Prison an average-sized facility. This prison is unique in that it has an open-bar system as opposed to solid doors on inmates' cells. There is very little prior research available on the impact of an open-bar system compared to solid door cell fronts, however anecdotal evidence from current, retired, and resigned COs has suggested that the open bars at MBP create a more dangerous environment for COs. Similarly, previous research suggested that the open-bar cell front type is a potential indicator of certain types of inmate misbehavior, such as minor incidents of throwing items at COs, or more violent behavior like grabbing COs through the bars (Miller, 1989).



Photograph by Kathryn Bishop Eckert



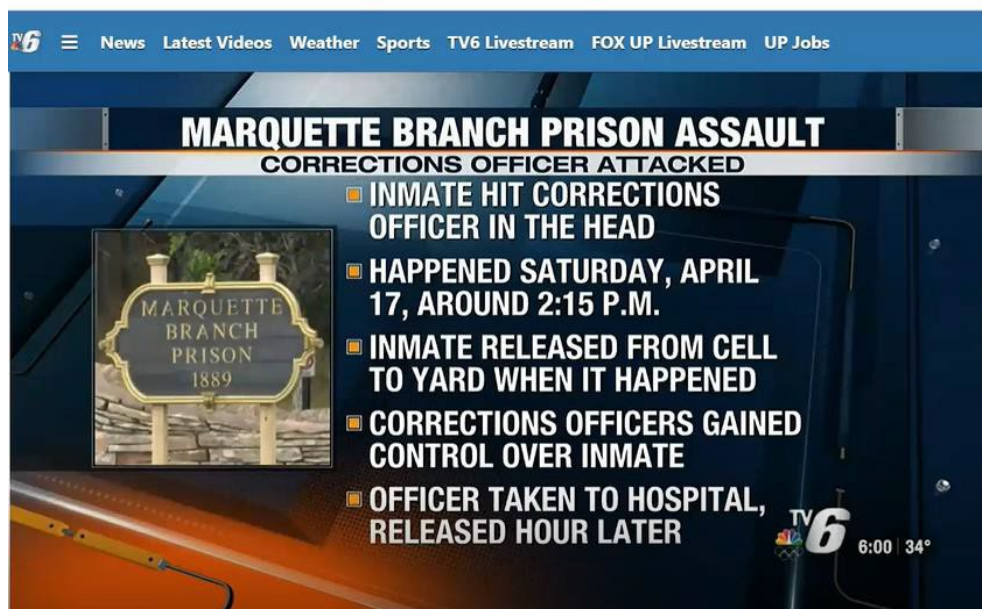
The Role of Corrections Officers

The role of the CO is to oversee the custody, security, and treatment of inmates. This can be anything from moving an inmate from one location to another, watching for suspicious behavior during meals or yard time, checking for contraband, supervising inmates during showers, etc. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). COs have a lot of face-time with inmates, and in maximum security facilities (such as MBP) they work directly with many inmates who are known gang members, have major mental illnesses, or are repeat violent offenders. The position of a CO is important in prison facilities—they are the first in line to secure an area or inmate if there is a problem. Inmates often attempt to gain access to illicit substances or weapons, and sometimes attack staff, COs, or other prisoners so that they may get moved to a different facility, because they were paid by other inmates, and for various other reasons.

Assaults on COs at MBP

Regarding assaults on COs at Marquette Branch Prison, it is impossible to get an accurate number due to several factors—lack of reporting, lack of cooperation from MDOC, inability to interview current COs, no available public records, etc. However, the Marquette prosecutor's office does have a record of those assaults that are reported to the Prosecuting Attorney, and in 2019 the number of assaults on COs reported to the prosecuting attorney's office in Marquette was 37 compared to 2020 when it rose to 64. There were 59 reported in 2021, and as of February 28, 2022, 6 assaults had already been reported. These are only the incidents that get reported to the prosecutor—many assaults are never publicly reported due to various factors such as incidents involving inmates serving life sentences, minor incidents, and so forth.

In the news, several major assaults were documented between the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to the present day (Public Radio 90, n.d.). A female CO was stabbed multiple times and a male CO that suffered roughly a dozen blows to the head were two major physical assaults that occurred in 2021 and were reported in the local news. This paper will examine the occurrence of assaults on COs and how or if the COVID-19 pandemic factored into the apparent rise in assaults.



Hazards of Working as a CO: Occupational Stress

Corrections is a dangerous profession and workers in prisons around the world experience a multitude of stressful experiences and conditions at their jobs. Occupational stress is defined as the stimuli present in the workplace itself that directly causes an employee stress. Examples of occupational stressors include strict policies, unsafe working conditions, being secluded/isolated, bullying or discrimination, lack of support, being overworked, etc., and corrections officers are exposed to a multitude of these occupational stressors on a daily basis. In a 2021 study by Katie Lorraine Hughes-Taylor (2021), various work environment stressors are highlighted, such as consistent short-staffing, exposure to violence and threats of violence, and death. Hughes-Taylor's research echoes similar findings to older studies by Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) and Woodruff (1993) where they cite that "High levels of job stress have been linked to serious negative outcomes, such as premature death, health problems, illness, mental health problems, social problems, and decreased job performance" (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987; Woodruff, 1993). Occupational stress leads to decreased mental health, and a lack of work-life balance has a negative impact on worker retention. A major factor contributing to stress in the workplace in corrections is understaffing leading to increased overtime and burnout. Short-staffing creates a work environment where the employees are overworked, exhausted, and sometimes asked to carry out duties that they would not normally perform. Several studies asking COs about contributing factors to stress highlight that over 70% of COs attribute short-staffing to high levels of stress" (Cornelius, Gary, 2022).

Occupational Stress Effects on Mental Health

Of significant interest is the impact of workplace conditions and occupational stress on the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health concerns in corrections officers. In one study the rate of depression was significant amongst COs (36%) and it is noted that depression is one of the costliest health conditions and a leading cause of disability around the world. Depression is also the leading cause of suicide, and corrections officers—as well as other law enforcement workers—have high rates of suicide (Denhof & Spinaris, n.d.). In this same study "it was found that 33.7% of COs were estimated to be PTSD Positive, and 43-64% met criteria for individual diagnostic symptom clusters" (Denhof & Spinaris, n.d.).

In 1999 *Corrections Today* published an article that read COs are "three times more likely to commit suicide than they are to be killed on the job" and in 2019, U.S. corrections officers had the highest-ever rate of suicides (Barr and Thomas, 2019). Research done in 1997 showed that the rate of suicide among corrections officers was 39% higher than the majority of the population of working age and yet another study showed that COs have a suicide rate of twice the rate as that of police officers and the general population (National Institute of Corrections Information Center, 2019). Overall rates of PTSD in the corrections community are much higher than even that of the veteran population, and in a 2016 study, over 33% of Michigan corrections officers were estimated to have symptoms of PTSD (Denhof and Spinaris, 2016). This is nearly twice the rate of PTSD as that of military veterans, estimated in most research to be roughly 10-20% ("Post-Traumatic Stress," n.d.).

Occupational stress leads to decreased mental health, and a lack of work-life balance has a negative impact on worker retention. A major factor contributing to stress in the workplace in corrections is understaffing leading to increased overtime and burnout. Short staffing creates a work environment where the employees are overworked, exhausted, and sometimes asked to carry out duties that they would not normally perform. "Studies have shown that over 70% of correctional officers said that short staffing contributes to high levels of stress" (Cornelius, Gary, 2022). One historical reason for turnover of COs is work-on-family conflict, or when work and family are incompatible (Vickovic & Morrow, 2020). Being that corrections is well-known to be a high-stress career, this is not unsurprising. In addition, while there is research depicting the common stressors of this position, rates of suicide, and PTSD, there is no research about turnover and retention, stress, safety, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Occupational Stress Effects on Other Areas in Life

Work-related hypervigilance is another result of occupational stress on corrections officers. In the prison environment, COs must always be on their guard against threats as anything may happen at any given time. They cannot relax. This hypervigilance can and does extend past the workplace environment, and may last for months and even years after a CO leaves the job. Work-related hypervigilance is known to lead to negative health outcomes due to inducing a constant state of heightened arousal, which leads to poor quality of sleep, physical symptoms, and negative impacts on relationships with others (Fritz et al., 2018).

The toll that stress takes on COs is enormous. Research from 1983 investigated how stress impacted correctional officers in New Jersey. The results showed a 20.9% divorce rate, 36% as having financial troubles, 30% had health problems, and the average life expectancy was only 59 years of age for the roughly 143 COs in the study (Causes of Correctional Officer Stress and Its Consequences, William Daniel McCarthy May 2012). An expert from this same article by McCarthy highlights an interesting fact about the physical toll that working as a CO has concerning blood pressure. The blood pressure of COs was higher than that of the inmates themselves which depicts issues within the field of corrections, and “Studies about correctional officers’ stress reported physical problems, and psychological ailments, associated with persistent levels of stress, including coronary heart disease, ulcers, hypertension, anxiety, and depression, occurring at higher frequencies than other blue-collar occupations” (Gross, et al., 1994). Thus, one can see the profound effects of occupational stress that impact corrections officers’ well-being physically, socially, and psychologically, contributing to the high turnover rate of this profession.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

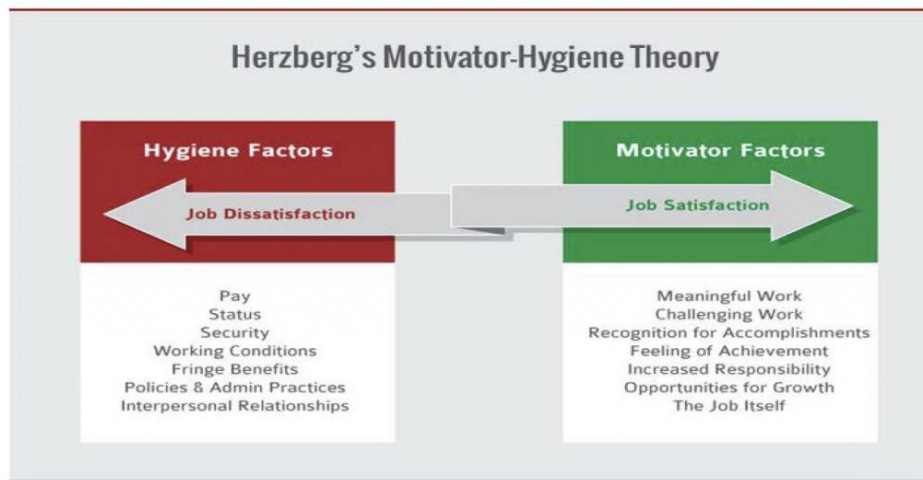
American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943; 1954) discussed the theory that humans make decisions and are motivated based on five core needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs, in that order of hierarchy (MasterClass Staff, 2020). Maslow focused on the positive aspects of human nature and his work had a major impact on how mental health was viewed in psychology, lasting even today. This popular theory is known today as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. His work stated that humans have different types of needs to fulfill, some are more important than others, and once needs at a certain level are met then the next set of needs can be attained. In the workplace environment context, many of these core needs may be either met or denied. If a work environment does not allow time for meals or forces workers to work too much overtime, for example, the most basic needs (food and rest, at the bottom of the ‘pyramid’) may become neglected. An unsafe workplace would impact the second tier of the pyramid in regard to safety and security, and when work takes precedence over family the third tier is negatively impacted, and so forth. This paper will use Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs to aid in explaining workplace factors that impacted a CO’s’ decision to leave their positions.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs



Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene theory, also called the two-factor motivation theory, is another theory that gives insight to workers' job satisfaction or dissatisfaction and motivators. Motivation-Hygiene theory looks at the relationship between the work environment and job-related benefits and what factors play into employee motivation or dissatisfaction, such as pay, conditions, relationships, meaningfulness, and opportunities. In Herzberg's view, motivational factors ensure job satisfaction, the absence of hygiene factors causes job dissatisfaction, and he conducted several studies trying to determine which work-related factors led to satisfaction and which to dissatisfaction. These satisfiers and dissatisfiers are on a continuum—they interact with each other, are changing and fluid, and are dependent on each individual's own personal and professional context (Nickerson, 2021). An example of a hygiene factor would be a lack of sufficient pay for an employee causing dissatisfaction, and an example of a motivator factor would be having work that is meaningful to that specific employee. There have been numerous other studies to show that certain factors are major contributors to employees' wanting to leave or leaving their jobs, such as poor relationships with coworkers or not feeling valued by their superiors (Kurt, 2021). Some of these factors will also be explored to gain insight into COs' perspectives on their reasons for leaving.



*Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory: Two-factor By Dr. Serhat Kurt March 31, 2021

Pulling from previous literature and tying the experience of these particular COs from this specific facility into the sociological theories of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene theory, the intent is to make connections between the work environment at MBP and high CO turnover rates and assess how the compounding factor of the COVID-19 pandemic come impacted workers' experiences.

Methods

In this case study, the researcher interviewed nine former corrections officers from MBP and will use an exploratory approach as further research is needed and suggestions will be made for the purpose of providing groundwork for corrective actions. The study participants consisted of two females and seven males, ranging in age from approximately 21 to 40 years of age, with a median work length at MBP of two years. Two participants worked at MBP for over nine years. All participants voluntarily left their employment as a CO at MBP during the COVID-19 pandemic dates of April 1, 2020, and April 1, 2022. They were asked a series of questions concerning their experiences working as a CO specifically at MBP, the impact the COVID-19 pandemic potentially had on the work envi-

ronment, and their decision to resign from their positions.

Methods used were direct outreach and a recruitment survey sent to a provided list of resigned COs which recruited nine participants and involved individual semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth qualitative data that was compiled to look for themes across perspectives and experiences. These findings were compared to national and state data (when obtainable) generated from the literature review.

The initial survey to judge interest in participating in the research project consisted of three questions:

1. Are you a former Corrections Officer from Marquette Branch Prison who resigned between April 1, 2020, and April 1, 2022?
2. If you answered YES to the above question and would like to be a participant in this case study, please enter your name and contact information (phone or email) in the comment box and I will reach out to you shortly.
3. If you are interested in participating, would you prefer a one-on-one interview or a group interview with other former COs present?

The respondents that answered “yes” to question two were contacted via their preferred method, and all nine participants were interviewed individually. The individuals that were contacted directly were simply asked if they were interested in participating in a case study and the research project was described to them. Those that agreed to participate were scheduled to be interviewed.

The interview itself consisted of four separate sections: About Your Job, COVID-19 and Mental Health, Assaults, and Suggestions for Improvement. Each section consisted of qualitative questions about the CO’s work experience at MBP such as (section one) how long they were employed there, benefits vs. hazards, job satisfaction/dissatisfaction, etc., (section two) how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their job, impacted their desire to leave, or affected their mental health, (section three) addressed assaults on themselves or co-workers, the impact of trauma, and the presence of PTSD symptoms, and (section four) asked about current support programs for COs and inmates and what suggestions they had for improvement. (See Appendix A for all questions in each section.) The interviewer also asked clarifying questions or asked the participant to go into more depth at times. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1.5 hours and were completed in person, at the participants’ homes. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and identifying information has been removed for confidentiality purposes, especially being that this is a small community, and many current and former COs know each other. Even age, sex, and length of time worked have been anonymized to avoid accidental identifying information. The quotes from participants have been edited for clarity when necessary.

Some of the information relevant to the facility, such as policies and procedures, turnover numbers, reported assaults, and some information about MBP specifically has been provided by current and past employees. The information was given freely and voluntarily under the condition of anonymity. Some information, such as turnover and current employee numbers and information about how MBP operates, was obtained by current COs working at MBP, former COs working at MBP in a different capacity, or those who work for the State of Michigan and fear harassment or reprisal. The sources (individuals providing the information) are reliable and knowledgeable.

Direct quotes from study participants are utilized heavily in this research to provide context for the reader. These former officers have various perspectives and many different experiences, and their words provide the depth necessary to understand what led to them making the choice to resign and the impacts of working as a CO at MBP.

Assessments and Measures

The participants answered a series of questions relating to their experiences, and that data was compiled to provide a snapshot of the reasons for their resignation. All participants' answers were analyzed to determine the similarities or differences in experiences. More quantitative questions were measured as percentages when necessary to compare to outside data, and qualitative responses were compiled to assess similarities and differences. For exam-

ple, the *quantitative* question “did working at the prison impact your ability to form meaningful relationships?”

Y = nine N = zero

100% (nine out of nine) participants stated that working at the prison impacted their ability to form meaningful relationships. The *qualitative* question “why did you leave your job as a CO at MBP?” has individual answers listed and assessed for similarities in responses, as seen below in this example:

- Anger, drinking
- Work-life balance: Overtime (OT) mandates
- Mandates/forced OT
- OT, short-staffing
- Mental health/distress due to safety, distress
- Safety: Administration wasn't doing anything to better the situation—they weren't listening to concerns brought up by COs
- Administration and forced OT
- Poor working environment (safety) and schedule (OT)
- Work-life balance (OT) and administration

Six out of nine participants stated that overtime was a factor in their decision to quit their job as a CO at MBP between April 1, 2021, and April 1, 2022. Other notable factors were safety (three) and problems with administration (six).

Assessing for Post-Traumatic Stress

In section three of the interview, participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after they had experienced a traumatic event. This was assessed through PTSD screening questions, and participants that had experienced the qualifying symptoms for the appropriate length of time (longer than one month of lasting symptoms), were identified as having symptoms of PTSD present. The rate of PTSD symptoms was then compared to national rates of correction officer PTSD, the general public, and military rates. The researcher is formally trained in mental health first aid and able to provide context and identify potential mental health problems, but not qualified to make any diagnosis. Any formal diagnosis of PTSD would have to be made by a certified health care professional.

Concerning Suggestions for Improvement

In the final section of the interview, participants were asked about current practices and programs for themselves and inmates and then asked what they thought could be done to improve various aspects of the job. These are all qualitative questions, and the main goal was to look for commonalities among the nine responses. In an earlier section of the interview, under “about the job,” the last question in that section asked participants what the prison could offer that would make them reconsider or return to their position as a CO. Those responses were also compiled and will be added to the final results in the area with suggestions for improvement.

Results

The results of this case study give an overview of what these nine former COs experienced at MBP during their employment, during a pandemic, and the reasons that they resigned as COs from this facility (some are COs elsewhere, and some are still employed at this prison but not as COs). The majority of participants responded that

issues with excessive overtime, safety, and problems with administration were the main causal factors in their decision to resign. The experiences that led to their resignation were primarily assaults, overtime, and administrative problems. In the following sections, the in-depth results of the interviews will be presented.

Being that this study intended to determine the causes of CO turnover at MBP, the following information (provided confidentially) highlights the loss of employees starting in 2019 and extending to the current year, 2022. Below are the number of staff that were employed each year from 2019 to 2022 and gives context to the former COs in this study's claims of short staffing.

- 1/13/2019 = 219
- 1/26/2020 = 182
- 5/2/2021 = 173
- 6/1/2022 = 136

A total of 96 COs quit their position from 2019 to 2022: 14 individuals changed positions and 82 left MBP completely. Of the nine case study participants, seven were employed at MBP for two years or less, highlighting that employment length of time had a negative impact on turnover during the pandemic. Employment length of time as a factor for (higher or lower) turnover is backed by recent information from *Lansing State Journal* which stated that “in the last fiscal year, 1,744 employees left the Michigan Department of Corrections, a turnover rate of 15.6%. Of those, 681 were corrections officers, and 106 had fewer than five years' experience” (Aguilar, 2022). Turnover rate for COs at MBP during that same year was 23.95%, a difference of 8.35% from the state average in 2021. One former employee stated, “When I started there, we had 110 people on second shift alone. When I left there, we had 55 I think.” The same article from the *Lansing State Journal* also speaks to forced overtime and nonadherence to the 32-hour rule, which is in place to keep officers from working 16-hour shifts back-to-back. One participant mentions working multiple 16-hour shifts in a row here: “They didn't care if we were doing eight sixteens (clarification: 8 days, 16-hour shifts) in a row.” These are known problems currently happening across Michigan state prisons, and as mentioned in the literature review short-staffing is a leading cause of stress as reported by 70% of COs (Cornelius, Gary, 2022).

Section One: Job Experiences

Outcome 1: Training

One of the initial questions asked to study participants about their training as a CO was “Do you feel like you were adequately trained for your position?” and while the participants had a fairly even split (five yes, four no), there were caveats to these answers. Following are some of the answers from study participants in regards to if they thought they had adequate training. “Not for Marquette. They take you through the academy and everything, they train you the basics of everything, but then you ask things and they're like, oh, you'll find out when you get there. Because Marquette is not talked about during training.”

The following participant elaborated on why training was not adequate in regards to the facility set-up at MBP.

“Dangerous, open bars. I would say the whole place is just a safety hazard, no matter where you go. In other facilities there are PPDs that you can use if something happens—there's people pretty much around every corner. Marquette's the same way, but it's just ultimately you're in a dangerous situation just because of the way people are relaxed about everything every day.”

Open-barred facilities are different from sold-door facilities in that they allow inmates to pass items such as weapons or homemade alcohol through the bars to other inmates, grab COs, and throw items or liquids (such as bodily fluids)

at COs and other staff (Anonymous, 2022). Solid-door facilities mitigate these issues, and in academy COs are trained only for solid-door facilities. When they start their positions at MBP, they have not been trained on how to handle the situations with open-bars.

Another participant stated that “A level-V barred facility comes with a slew of issues and possibilities for assault that are not as prevalent in other facilities.” The fact that MBP is an open- bar cell front prison was brought up by participants frequently, and in the literature review, there is mention of open-bar vs solid-door units having a negative impact on inmate behavior and assaults on COs. These former officers mentioned that generally training was adequate, yet the open-bar system in addition to other factors makes MBP different from other facilities. This study participant backed up this sentiment by saying, “The instructors were really good, but like I said, it wasn't really meant for Marquette Branch Prison.”

Outcome 2: Work-life balance

Another major question, “Did you work around your job, or did your job work around you?” was met with 100% of individuals responding that they worked around their jobs. Some of their responses in detail are as follows: “I worked around my job 110%. It ran my life.” Another former CO stated specifically that it led to their resignation. “Oh yeah, no, the work-life balance was horrible. That's why I left.” And the majority of other participants stated similar sentiments. Poor work-life balance stemming from short-staffing was the top factor that led to COs resigning from MBP, and prior research supports that many COs become stressed or resign due to short- staffing leading to overtime and poor work-life balance (Cornelius, Gary, 2022). COs in this study frequently stated that there had already been problems with staffing and recruitment prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the pandemic exacerbated the problem as many COs who were close to retirement retired early, COs were often sick with COVID-19 and unable to come to work because of quarantine, and this created a cascade effect of increasing short-staffing and increasing amounts of overtime.

Outcome 3: Job enjoyment

One of the positive aspects of working at MBP for COs was their relationships with their coworkers. Of the participants, 100% responded that they had good relationships with their CO coworkers and direct line supervisors; however, they felt differently about upper-level staff and administration. Participants spoke highly of their peers, and many keep ongoing friendships with their former coworkers even though they no longer work at the prison. Participants said the following about the differences between their work relationships with peers and administration: (Concerning CO co-workers) “Really good relationships. Some of the best I've ever had.” A participant’s view of how a change in staff affected the work environment was this, “The older administration that went into retirement or early retirement during COVID, they were fantastic. What we are left with now is politics.” Again, a former CO mentions, “Good relationships with coworkers, not with administration,” and here is a statement concerning administration: “I didn't really like the policies or the way they approached other people or situations.”

Overall, the main reason that former COs enjoyed their prior job at MBP (seven out of nine responded that they liked their job) was that the COs all had good relationships with their peers, which is backed by their responses to “reasons you liked your job.” The reason for enjoying their employment was their coworkers. All COs responded that they enjoyed working with fellow COs. “The relationships you form with your coworkers because they have your back. That's what makes it.” Or, “I loved the people.” The participants frequently highlighted a sense of camaraderie, such as the statement, “My fellow officers, the bond and brotherhood I had with them. That was the only aspect of the job I liked,” and this one by another, “A sense of

camaraderie between everybody. I mean, it's like a big family, pretty much. I'm sure you've seen it. Everyone's around, people have your back, and if something happens, you can talk to somebody about it. And that's what I liked.”

The reasons for disliking their job were more varied. Their responses included answers such as, “Forced overtime is never fun. I could do it for a while, but it just gets to a limit. Staff assaults. It's tough. Seeing people you care about get hurt. I had to see that a few times.” And this statement by another study participant, “The somewhat incompetence of the upper administration. Yeah, and the mandatory overtime and lack of staff.” An interesting fact came out that new staff are given the ‘worst’ jobs at MBP, including some of the more dangerous positions. One participant mentions, “I didn't like that being new, you got forced into the worst places with the most dangerous individuals. I didn't like how they set up the new people with the worst individuals when you didn't have Tasers and stuff.”

The following are longer quotes directly from former COs regarding assaults and administration, provided for context.

“Probably how unsafe the administration made it. They would take prisoners' opinions over our own, and kind of take that over our safety, where if they shook down a unit, I mean really shook it down, and then the next day administration said, hey, we're gonna run these yards. And within minutes of them running the yard, four officers were assaulted.”

“They came out and then just went after people. They kind of had a heads up last Thanksgiving when somebody was assaulted, that it wasn't an isolated incident, and still ran yards. The next day didn't shake it down. Didn't look for the remaining pieces of a weapon. They just went on as if it was normal. So I think the administration just makes it unsafe to appease prisoners. So something would happen—somebody jacked in the face, punched straight in the face. They didn't lock it down. They ran yards 20 minutes later.”

“Administration would give into the convicts. When I first started there, the inmates knew their place. The officers knew their place. As the years went by—more so when the new warden got there—it became more about just trying to keep the inmates happy enough so that way they don't cause problems for her (the warden).”

As noted in the respondents' answers above, the way the administration was running operations caused them to feel unsafe at their job, they were witnesses to or victims of assaults, and they were forced into unsustainable amounts of overtime. The follow-up question was: “did you feel valued by your superiors?” and six out of three responded with “yes,” but there were caveats. Of the six who responded with a “yes,” five added that they felt valued by their sergeants and lieutenants (first line supervisors) but not by any higher administration. So effectively eight out of nine did not feel valued by higher administration.

“I think I felt valued by my first line superiors—my sergeants, my lieutenants. But anything higher than them we were just a number on their roster. They didn't care if we were doing eight-sixteens (clarification: 8 days, 16-hour shifts) in a row. As long as you were filling a post that's all they needed”.

This participant stated, “I think we all felt like we were kind of just worthless and we were just easily replaceable. That's how we all felt” and another backs up previous feelings of being undervalued by administration but regarded by first line supervisors by stating: “I feel like the officers were very unseen in the environment. But from captain on down, I feel like they would have your back and they recognized you.” Prior research also highlights problems with administration leading to frustration at work and unsafe working conditions, so this is not an unexpected finding.

Outcome 4: Stress

Concerning stress, study participants were asked to rate how stressful they found their position to be on a scale of one-to-five, with one being little to no stress and five being extremely stressful. Four rated it as a four, and four rated it as a five, with an average stress level of four-point-five. One respondent did not rate it outright and had this to say: “I'd say the first five years it'd be a one. The last couple years, it just ratcheted up till it got to a two, a

five, and I just left.” Another participant added to that answer with this statement:

“After you leave, you kind of realize you were more stressed than you thought you were, you know? It's the underlying stress, the stress of, I mean, at any point somebody could try stabbing you. Or go after one of your friends, and that's a crappy part of it. Constantly (on edge) like I was in the military. And I mean, you knew that was gonna happen, but I think there was more stress in this than when I was overseas.”

When asked about using substances to cope with the stress of their job, six out of nine responded that yes, they relied upon alcohol or other substances to cope. Of participating former COs, 66.66% relied on substances—mainly alcohol—to cope. The three that replied with “no” acknowledged that COs frequently use alcohol specifically as a coping mechanism, and this participant that responded with a “no” responded, “I think that coping with something might have helped, but I don't drink or anything like that really. But I think I should have probably seen somebody to cope with it, but no, I didn't.” Two-thirds of these former COs needed to rely on substances to cope with their day-to-day job, and the other third fully acknowledged that it is a known issue in the profession.

Outcome 5: Relationships

Another question that was answered with a 100% response of “yes” was: “Did working at the prison impact your ability to form meaningful relationships? How about existing relationships?” All participants answered yes to this, and some of their thoughts were: “It's hard to spend time with other people when you're always at work, and you never know when you're going to be mandated” and “It's just hard to relate to people after like going through the experiences that you go through . . . you kind of end up just hanging out with your coworkers and whatnot.” The theme of neglecting relationships and only spending time with other COs or prison staff comes up frequently. This former officer said, “Especially family relationships. I didn't get to see them. I didn't see friends. I didn't see family. So I went to work with guys at the prison. I went to the bars with guys from the prison. I hung out with guys from the prison.” The feeling of self-isolation and not wanting to talk about their experiences is highlighted by this former officer: “I lost 90% of my friends after I started there because I've just been bitter and don't want to be, ‘well now it's fine.’ I didn't want to be around anybody that didn't understand. Because I get mad. They're like, ‘how was your day?’ I'm like, don't wanna talk about it. So yeah. Family too. My (close relative) works at the prison. So that turned into me going out to their house and then they'd talk about work and I'm like, I don't want to talk about this. Huge, huge impact.”

Their experiences highlight the emotional toll that their job had on them, making these COs experience difficulty relating to people outside the prison environment and resulting in isolation and lessened empathy mentioned here, “I definitely became a lot more callous.”

Outcome 6: Reasons for Leaving

“Why did you leave your job as a CO at MBP?” was the question that started to get into the meat of the research topic, which is turnover. The participants responded by listing their top two-to-three reasons why they resigned.

- Increased anger and drinking
- Work-life balance: Overtime (OT) and mandates
- Mandates/forced OT
- OT, short-staffing, administration
- Mental health distress due to safety
- Safety. Administration not listening to concerns brought up by COs
- Administration and forced OT
- Poor working environment (safety) and schedule (OT)
- Work-life balance (OT) and administration

Over 66% of the participants mentioned overtime/poor work-life balance as a factor caused by short-staffing, which is in line with the roughly 70% of COs that reported short-staffing as a major cause of occupational stress in the literature review. Forty-four percent mentioned administration as being an issue, and 33% noted safety as impacting their decision to quit their job as a CO. Overtime, administration, and safety were continuing themes throughout the interview. Below are some insights into what these COs experienced, using several direct quotes from study participants.

“The mandates, the forced overtime, was just way, way, way too much. I could handle a bit, like I said earlier, but that was the number one reason. There were all kinds of other ones, but that's number one.”

“Administration had seemed to care more about the prisoners than they cared about their fellow officers. There were some instances where we'd bring up issues to upper administration explaining how this policy change would be dangerous—to the work conditions and to ourselves. And they'd almost ignore it or go through with that policy change. I always knew the moment I didn't feel like I could do the job anymore to my best abilities or mentally be able to do the job, I'd have to leave. And I, then I just left then and there that day that I felt like I couldn't do it anymore.”

“I think just when I was looking into the future and realizing that there was no chance of it getting better because they had just re-upped her (warden) contract there and without her gone nobody else was coming in to fix things. We tried, the officers tried getting together and going to them with stuff that could be fixed, you know, because basically the inmates they're taking over the prison. Okay. I mean they say they're not, but that's what it is.”
“I went in and at 19 and I feel like I wasn't able to really enjoy my life as a new adult.

And then on top of that, administration . . . feels like they cared about the inmates a lot more than they did the officers.”

“The overtime was a factor towards the end. I started to see the writing on the wall of just how it had gone downhill so quickly in the time that I had been there. And I could tell that it was only gonna get worse and worse. And the hiring, for example, wasn't gonna improve. We weren't gonna be able to staff all the guys that were leaving in droves. We'd get maybe a handful of officers every three, four months, but we'd lose maybe double that.”

The follow-up questions in this section all held to the same theme, that these nine former COs overwhelmingly quit their jobs due to poor work-life balance due to forced overtime mandates caused by severe short-staffing, problems with administration, and safety concerns in regards to assaults by inmates. When asked what experiences cause them to leave, one participant had this to say about assaults:

“Marquette had more assaults in a year than all of the other facilities combined. (The information) I think might've been through the union. They would post on the Facebook page, like staff assaults per year or actually, no, there was a spreadsheet too. But we looked at it and we were like, holy shit. That's more that happens here than anywhere else.”

Another participant stated this concerning the administration:

“After numerous attempts to tell them (the administration) that this is what's going on, this is what needs to be changed, they didn't care. They just like to say the same phrase over and over again—‘it's an isolated incident.’ And I took that as, okay. You don't care. Whether it was isolated or not, you're giving inmates the idea that they can keep getting away with it.”

When asked what the biggest impact was that caused them to quit, similar themes emerged, except for assaults. While administration and schedule were still the top two results, mental health and well-being replaced assaults as being the third most common “biggest impact” on their decision to resign.

Section Two: Mental Health

Outcome 1: COVID-19

In this second section of the interview, participants were asked about their experiences at MBP during the COVID-19 pandemic and how changes during this time potentially led to their resignation. The first question in this section, “Did COVID-19 play any factor in your decision to leave MBP?” gets straight to the point. Participants had a variety of answers, most relating to either policies or additional stressors that were affecting an already stressful work environment. Answers ranged from a simple “no” to dislike of mask mandates, getting COVID-19, and short-staffing issues. The following two quotes from participants speak to some of the conditions that were caused by or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Because of COVID-19, a lot of people left and took early retirements; a lot of things were shut down. A lot of people got sick and we were working short so I understand that caused a lot of people to quit because they were sick of seeing it. Yeah. Which caused a staffing issue, which caused a mandate issue, which caused me to be unhappy with how much I was working.”

This former officer speaks to what it was like trying to enforce new rules on inmates by stating, “Telling a hundred-plus inmates in the unit to keep their masks on . . . you can only do that so many times before they just get fed up with it.” The mask enforcement on inmates was mentioned a few times, especially concerning the level-V inmates with major mental disorder and the difficulty in getting them to follow masking rules.

When asked specifically about policies that changed during COVID-19, the majority of participants responded with “no.” Eight out of nine said that changes in policy were not the causes of their resignation. However, new causes of stress were reported, and short-staffing, increased assaults, bringing COVID-19 home, and generally being stressed and on edge were the top stressors. Increased staff assaults were again a major component mentioned by participants, and many said that the COVID-19 stimulus checks and being short-staffed played a big part in the increase in assaults.

“One of the big things that affected the work environment was the prisoners getting the stimulus check because that gave them the power to put out hits on staff, any staff they wanted, for very minor reasons. That’s where you would see the uptick in assaults happening is because they were getting that money and they were using it to put out hits on staff.”

“That’s not safe when there’s only three people for yards. When there’s a fight on a gallery, you might not walk away from that. My first thought all the time was if I get thrown off this gallery will I make it?”

“We definitely had a lot more staff assaults. And there’s a number of, everyone’s wondering why there weren’t lots of investigations. I know a couple that were thrown out that seemed to have real merit. The prisoners were getting COVID-19 relief money and a lot of that money was being spent on assaults. And I heard that from official people that I won’t name.”

Outcome 2: Morale

When asked about morale during the pandemic, 100% of participants said that morale at MBP was negatively affected during this time. Reasons given for low morale were policies, overtime, burnout, people getting sick, and assaults. During the interviews, all participants stated that morale was poor, and the following statements made by these former officers show how they were feeling during this period. “Almost every person that used to joke no longer had it in them. We were barely surviving.” Another participant details that “There were times they didn’t have enough staff to run a shift . . . so they just shorted officers in each unit instead of shutting down things.” This CO mentions burnout and mental exhaustion and directly stated that “People were getting overworked. They were getting mentally tired. They were getting burned out.” One concerning aspect mentioned by a study participant was that

the COs were so burned out and exhausted that some were actively trying to get COVID-19 just to get time off, and they also spoke about sharing PPE. Here is what they said:

“People were trying to get COVID, that's how bad it was because people didn't wanna be there. It definitely changed the morale. There were two different types of people. We're not gonna wear these masks. We don't care what happens. And other people are like, yeah, we're gonna wear these, but I'm gonna get sick anyway. I know multiple people that had to stay in hotels. Stayed away from their family, even when they didn't have it. People that had bad immune systems. Just, I mean, there's people there that could have died—literally could have died. And they (administration) just, oh, here's a shitty mask, wear this. Here's your PPE at shift change. Just give it to the next person.”

When concerns were brought up to supervisors by COs, seven out of nine responded that concerns were only taken seriously or addressed by their immediate supervisors—sergeants, lieutenants, and sometimes captains—however not by upper administration. This feeling of not being heard by the administration at MBP comes up frequently, and it is easy to see that it affected working conditions and morale of the employees. In addition to an already stressful job, there was an increasing level of short-staffing and increasing numbers of assaults on COs, and the administration was adding to their distress by making them feel unheard and undervalued.

Outcome 4: Substance Use during COVID-19

Of the participants, 66.66% stated that their use of substances either started or increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nicotine and alcohol use were the reported substances, along with caffeine. Alcohol is mentioned more than once as being used as a coping mechanism by COs to deal with the stress of their jobs during the initial question of substance use, and the follow-up question about substance use during the pandemic only backed that information up further. These participants had this to say about their substance use during the pandemic:

“You want to go out and, you know, talk with your coworkers and be like this is going on and this happened today. I don't know, like using it to kind of decompress and cope.”

“I know the guys at the prison are still drinking a lot because they message me, but I don't know if they're using it as a coping or more of a social thing to get their mind off work. I definitely drank more when I was there than I ever have.”

“Caffeine and nicotine definitely had a large increase. I was trying to stay awake.” Coping with alcohol is consistently mentioned by COs, current and former, even by those who do not drink. The method of coping with the stress of work is generally to spend time with their coworkers outside of work, mainly at bars or other pastimes involving alcohol.

Outcome 5: Relationships

When asked if working at MBP during the pandemic negatively impacted the COs' relationships, eight out of nine responded “yes.” Due to the excessive overtime there was little opportunity to maintain relationships, and COs spoke of self-isolation during what little time off they had. One of the prior interview questions asked about relationships, and in that question all respondents answered that yes, working at MBP negatively affected their relationships, this result is unsurprising considering the increase in overtime and stress. The same theme of only spending time with coworkers comes up again in this statement: “I pretty much closed myself off to just my coworkers and I only really hung out with my coworkers”; then this participant goes into how their family noticed the difference after they left and how they feel better since resigning,

“Every single relationship with everybody. There wasn't I don't think a single person that couldn't tell the difference. I mean, my family that works there is like, I'm glad you're not working there anymore. You seem way happier. I feel way better. I literally feel just way better. Like my worst day is now . . . like last week I had a really bad day at work, and I was driving home. I'm like, how did I feel like this? Every single day, every single day. I felt like my

worst day recently.”

Outcome 6: Mental Health Services and Suicide

Eight out of nine participants responded that their mental health was negatively affected due to working in their position during the pandemic, and eight out of nine also responded that their feelings or behavior changed as a result of working at MBP during the course of the pandemic. Anxiety was frequently mentioned, such as with this COs statement of, “If you're not anxious there, there's something wrong with you. Because you're always watching over your back. You're definitely hypervigilant—and you take that with you forever.” The following was experienced by this study participant:

“My last year working there almost every day before work I'd throw up because I was so anxious. It was almost every day. About a year before I left, I'd throw up just right before I left for work, I was so nervous. During that time I also never had dreams, but if I did have dreams, [they] would be about work or be a nightmare about work. I was definitely more irritable. I remember the smallest instance would just kind of throw me in a fit of rage. I'd just get really mad over the smallest inconvenience. Definitely drank a lot more, and used tobacco a lot more. Me and my fellow officers when we weren't being mandated for overtime, we'd spend every night at the bar.” Here again is the mention of using alcohol to cope, spending time with fellow officers, anxiety, and irritability. This former officer explains the reasoning why they were stressed and on edge by saying, “It wasn't because of COVID itself. It's because we were all so highly stressed because there were inmates acting out just doing crazy stuff because I mean, they're stuck in there every day. You didn't know what was going to happen.”

Even though poor mental health is frequently mentioned, not a single participant voluntarily used the mental health services offered through their job, even though numerous mental health concerns were noted. When asked about any stigma surrounding getting mental health care at the prison, almost half stated that they did not believe that there was stigma in seeking mental health services through the wellness program that MBP offers. Still, none of these participants utilized the service. One participant who did speak with the wellness people had this to say:

“The only time I spoke with them, they came in and they would ask you how you're feeling. I would say the same thing. People, not even generally myself, just saying the overall morale was going down. I think the only time I talked to them on the phone was when they called me after (name redacted co-worker) got stabbed in the face. I blew up on the phone and I told them I was about to walk in there and quit because they weren't doing anything. So I think it's the only time I talked to them and again, they would reiterate to us, yes, we can listen to you, but there's nothing we can do about this.”

So while some participants said there was no stigma per se, several did mention that they did not think the prison wellness program was confidential or they thought it was useless. Slightly over half of the participants, five out of nine, did say that there was stigma surrounding seeking mental health help. Here are two opposing views on the subject:

“They were very open about talking to the wellness unit and talking to people if there was anything going on. But another big thing in the prison was you didn't know when people were being serious or not. Because we joked about it so much. Oh yeah. You know, we, we were so dark. And you didn't know, like somebody could joke around and be like, oh, I'm gonna go and eat a bullet tonight. And you're like, ha, are you serious?”

“I think there was an overall stigma about getting help. Yeah. I mean, a lot of people there drink a lot, and a lot of that is due to working there.”

To reiterate, even though almost half of the participants did not think there was stigma about mental health care at the prison, not a single participant utilized the wellness program for mental health even when they stated having had mental health concerns. This is backed by the statements from these former COs who stated, “I had been offered (wellness services) more than once with incidents I've been involved in. I never took them,” and, “I had that panic attack at work. I was definitely referred to the mental health service by one of my supervisors. I did not actually take advantage of that.” Four out of nine participants did seek mental health care outside of the prison; however,

two of them were not for work-related concerns. Of the participants who did not seek outside care, two said that they should have and one of them did not have insurance and could not afford care.

Concerning the risk of suicide, two participants reported having thoughts of suicide both during and prior to the pandemic, at a rate of 22.22%. A survey from California State Prisons in 2017 found that 10% of its COs had thoughts of suicide compared to the average U.S. adult at 3% (Luke Barr, Pierre Thomas, 2019). In this small case study, the results showed double the rate of suicidal tendencies in these COs from MBP compared to Californian State COs, and a 2017 article by the *Lansing State Journal* highlighted suicide risk and PTSD among Michigan COs. In the article, it stated that “an MCO-sponsored study released last year found 5% of Michigan corrections officers were at a high risk for suicide and more than a third suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder” (Hinkley, 2017). In this case study, there was a significantly higher rate of risk of suicide (study participants at 22.22% vs Michigan average of 5%) and PTSD (study participants 77.77% vs Michigan average 33.33%, and this will be gone over thoroughly in section 3) at MBP during the COVID-19 pandemic than the Michigan state average for COs in 2016, potentially indicating either a significant risk of suicide and high rate of PTSD at this particular facility, an increase in these factors during COVID-19, or a combination of both. More investigation and research needs to be done on this subject with this population, especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects.

Outcome 7: Coping

Zero study participants reported ever having a comprehensive training or discussion that addressed coping with the stress of this job. More specifically, the work environment of MBP was not considered during training. The questions asked were, “Do you feel you had appropriate training in regards to learning about coping mechanisms for your job? Did your job provide services, information, or education about coping with stress or trauma?” and responses were as follows from the study participants:

“PowerPoint after PowerPoint—it was mundane, and if they did have it, it was useless” “Some kind of wellness, but it’s the same PowerPoint every single year. You click through it as quickly as possible and try to get 70% or better.”

“Lieutenant saying if you start driving to the bar every night after work to make it go away, you’re gonna find yourself divorced and alone . . . you do it on your own. No one talks to you.”

“They did give us packets and stuff for the wellness program and kind of talked to us about, you need to have a hobby, you need to, you know, get your mind off of work.

Things like that in the academy. Even when we were in the academy, they’re like, get out of the academy and don’t go to your hotel room and just stew over the day. They’re like, go to the gym, go hang out with the guys, go hang out, go find something to do. But I don’t think the training staff is equipped to train people that are going to Marquette.

They’re equipped to train level ones, two, maybe even fours with solid doors. They’re not training you to be face-to-face behind (open) bars.”

Even though this is a profession that is known to be dangerous, stressful, and has high rates of suicide, PTSD, anxiety, depression, and alcohol misuse, there is no comprehensive training for COs at MBP to learn how to cope with the stressful nature of their jobs. Several study participants spoke about seeing a dead body for the first time at work and it being brushed off. COs bear witness to inmate injury and self-harm, attempted and completed suicides, themselves and their coworkers being injured or threatened, inmates experiencing mental health crises, and even their peers experiencing mental health crises, and attempting or completing suicide. These are by definition traumatic events that can lead to depression, anger, and PTSD.

The last part of the mental health section simply asked participants if they had anything else they would like to say about their physical, mental, or emotional health and several responded with the following:

“I’m glad I got out of there.”

“I feel a lot more heard.”

“Leaving the prison as a CO was the best decision I’ve made . . . zero desire for me to go back.”

“My significant other loves to coach. He can’t do it. He can’t even make it to ball practice to help because there’s that cloud of action. Someday I hope that there’s enough staffing because if there was enough staffing, and there was an incentive to stay long term—like a pension or health care after retirement—that would be ideal. I bet you any money you throw those things out there and it’ll be like it was 20, 30 years ago where you had to wait on a waitlist to get into the prison. It was wonderful.”

“Got COVID-19 from work.”

“I also wasn’t eating enough. Sometimes because of the overtime, I only had one meal a day, so I was somewhat underweight. It wasn’t until after I left that I was able to actually eat. I started gaining weight again and getting at a healthy weight. There was also sometimes at work I’d go on a lunch break and I’d just be too stressed out to eat. And so I just didn’t eat.”

“I know other officers that had panic attacks, whether they were at home or at work. I remember I had a good friend who had a panic attack at work. Yeah, I’d say I had flashbacks, I guess, where I’d kind of freeze up when I’d be at home. Just like my assaults where it’d just kind of I guess paralyze me for like a minute or two until I could try and settle down my mind.”

“Physical health definitely goes down a little bit because you are under constant stress.” “Before I left, I saw nine major assaults just in the year and a half I was there.

Female staff I remember getting stabbed in the face numerous times. After being there for only a couple months, I responded to a guy that I was going to the bars and hanging out with getting punched in the face numerous times. I saw a lot of major assaults while I was there. And the administration did nothing.”

“Physical. Like feeling my fingers, how nice and crooked they are. They (administration) don’t really take anything that happens to you under consideration, except for when it’s happening. So let’s say somebody got stabbed, right? Then afterwards, after you come back to work, it’s kind of just like, oh that happened.”

Impacts on health in all aspects (bio-psycho-social) were noted. Not eating, throwing up due to anxiety, isolation, anger . . . the impacts on officers’ health is apparent in all aspects of their lives.

Section 3: Assaults on COs

Outcome 1: Increased Assaults

The first question in this section asked the participants “With the increased number of staff assaults during the pandemic, do you believe that proper precautions or actions were taken to reduce assaults or prevent future assaults?” One hundred percent responded “no”, they did not think that precautions were taken to prevent future assaults. A couple of participants gave lengthy examples here to provide insight:

“Assaults? No, I don’t think so. I can’t remember how many years ago it was, but I was searching a cell and I found stuff that was reconsidered escape paraphernalia. I mean, it had, it had the address for the airport. It had phone numbers on there for the personal pilot so that he can get out there. And I turned all that in—wrote the ticket—and then it was shot down, and that’s amazing because that’s pretty serious. That same guy, a couple years later was involved with an actual escape attempt in which (a female CO) got pulled into a cell and assaulted. Luckily, she fought her out. That could have been bad. I mean, she could have been killed. The same day I think it was, someone got punched, which is part of that. And that was part of another escape attempt. It was a horrible attempt and idea, but still, that’s the stuff that I hated about that place. They don’t listen to [you], but you’re the ones on the ground and you know these people (the inmates).”

“No, I don’t think so because I remember specifically the day of an assault, an officer was assaulted on day

shift and the warden still wanted to run showers on the afternoon shift. And I know that's been the case more than once, about still wanting to have out of cell movement after an assault, either the day or two after where it should have more than definitely been locked down for a week or if not longer.”

This was followed by asking why the COs thought the number of assaults had increased during the pandemic, and while participants talked about several thoughts on the matter, the most frequently cited reason was that inmates were given the COVID-19 stimulus check and had access to money which they used to put hits out on COs followed by administration being too lenient with inmates and not taking what the COs were telling them into consideration when there were safety concerns. Their thoughts are below.

“Prisoners had the privilege of being able to use the phone with the stimulus bills that were given to the prisoners that gave a lot—a lot of the prisoners—and access to large sums of money to be able to put hits out on a lot of the staff. Yeah. I know there was one instance of an officer, not being followed outside of work, but almost being stalked outside of work, where a prisoner was able to get an officer's license plate number.”

“I think an increased sense of entitlement for the inmates because even when officers would say no, administrators come in and give them what they want anyways. And when we didn't give it to them, they got mad and it would go south fast.”

“I think what caused more was the relief money. All the inmates got that. I mean, it's: you go from a convict having \$0 to a convict having \$1,500—and they'll kill a guy for \$10. So yeah. I mean, I literally saw a guy stabbed, and the guy that stabbed him was paid, like a candy bar, you know?”

“Our administration would say, ‘Oh, it's an isolated incident.’ It's an isolated incident. It doesn't matter. We have a CO who just got stabbed in the face eight times. And yeah, you can lock the facility down and move them all. Then we're finally getting over it and there'd be another one. And I noticed that as they went on, some of them were getting worse and worse or had the potential to be worse assaults. Like when they tried to take a yard and they went after our Lieutenant. And they never even locked the facility down. They said, oh, it was an isolated incident. And that was their favorite term to use.” Again, here is the running theme of increased assaults and problems with administration.

Other possible causes listed were the inmates being cooped up or “cabin fever,” inmates being frustrated by the increase in rules and lack of visitors during the height of COVID-19, and inconsistency when enforcing the rules.

Outcome 2: Victims of Assault

Study participants were asked if they had ever been a victim of an assault, and if so what type. Below is a list of each participant's experience concerning whether they had ever experienced an assault and the type of assault.

- Aggravated indecent exposure
- Dressed out—bodily fluids thrown at (several aggravated indecent exposures)
- Not assaulted
- Four assaults—dressed out three times, physically assaulted once (four assaults within two years)
- Physical assault—punched in the head and face
- Dressed out—hit in the face with bodily fluid
- Shortly before the pandemic, but not during
- Not assaulted during COVID-19
- Not assaulted

Out of nine participants, only two had never been assaulted. Five were assaulted during the course of the pandemic, and one former CO was assaulted four times within those two years. Two others were assaulted before the pandemic, but not during. Previous research suggests that the majority of assaults on COs happen to younger, more inexperienced officers, and the majority of these officers worked at MBP for two years or less. Of the two older of-

ficers in the study, one was never assaulted, and one had a minor assault prior to the pandemic, supporting prior research on inexperienced officers experiencing higher assault rates. An in-depth study conducted at the facility with current COs would be beneficial, as this is a small study of only nine former officers.

Specifically speaking about female COs, aggravated indecent exposure was cited by all the female study participants. Inmates exposed themselves daily to some staff, and those staff were told that “it’s part of the job” and it was “not taken seriously.” One participant said, “No one wants to see that. I think it would be different if more males were having that happen to them, to be honest.” One participant talked about the impact it had on specifically female employee retention. “Exposures and dressed out. That’s probably a big reason why we’ve lost as many female cos as we have, of all the new female COs coming in. My guess is that 50% left. One was seriously assaulted.” No male COs reported indecent exposure as the way they were assaulted, but several were dressed out.

Marquette Branch Prison



Crime

MDOC says woman assaulted by Marquette prisoner

Nicole Walton, April 25, 2022



Crime

Another CO attacked at Marquette prison

Nicole Walton, November 30, 2021



Crime

More serious assaults reported at Marquette Branch Prison

Nicole Walton, August 5, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— An inmate at Marquette Branch Prison assaulted two female staff members this week Michigan Department of Corrections spokesman Chris Gautz...



Crime

Marquette prison locked down following assault on sergeant

Nicole Walton, July 13, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— Another correctional officer at the Marquette Branch Prison has been assaulted by inmates. The Michigan Department of Corrections says it...



Crime

MDOC reports 5th prisoner assault on an employee at Marquette Branch Prison

Nicole Walton, April 22, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— Another corrections officer has been assaulted by an inmate at Marquette Branch Prison. The Michigan Department of Corrections says it...



Law Enforcement

Prisoners assault Marquette Branch Prison staff again

Nicole Walton, March 15, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— Marquette Branch Prison staff were assaulted for the fourth time this year on Friday. A spokesman for the Michigan Department of...



Crime

Marquette prison sees another assault

Nicole Walton, March 10, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— Officials are reporting another assault by an inmate at Marquette Branch Prison. Sunday around 12:45 p.m. an officer was conducting a...



Crime

Marquette Branch Prison officer attacked by inmate

Nicole Walton, March 1, 2021

MARQUETTE, MI— A correctional officer at Marquette Branch Prison was assaulted by a maximum security prisoner Saturday afternoon. The Michigan Department...

(Public Radio 90, n.d.)

Outcome 3: Post-Traumatic Stress

All of the study participants were asked if they had ever been exposed to a traumatic event and were assessed for possible symptoms of PTSD. The question read, “During the time period of April 2020 to April 2022, did you experience the following: An exposure to extreme stress, as defined as: Being exposed to death, threatened with death, actual or threatened serious injury, actual or threatened sexual violence, or been witness to a trauma or learned that a co- worker was exposed to a trauma in the course of your professional duties that led to . . .” and was followed by a PTSD assessment questionnaire that asked specifically about intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms, mood and thought alterations, and arousal symptoms that lasted longer than one month. Possible PTSD symptoms were present in seven out of nine former COs— an exceedingly high rate even for corrections officers in general. The most common symptom was lasting hypervigilance, which all COs with potential PTSD-related symptoms reported feeling.

Common traumas witnessed included inmate deaths and attempted suicide, assaults on themselves or peers, and threats by inmates. Their statements concerning what they have witnessed while at their former jobs at MBP highlight just what COs witness during their career, and gives insight into why and how this job is so stressful. Listed below are several responses from participants about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts concerning the various traumatic experiences they have gone through. These are direct quotes from former COs at MBP, and some of the content may be disturbing to some readers.

“I’ve had to deal with assaults. There was a person who died by suicide and I had to do CPR and bring him to the hospital. His parents showed up a few hours later. That was pretty stressful. Wasn’t really prepared for that when I walked into work.”

“I had multiple friends attacked, a known hit out on me. You think about that every time you walk in. You walk in thinking that you might get assaulted. Everyone was talking about it all the time and it’s just terrifying. And like, people are like, oh, I saw the video and I’m like, yeah, that’s not something I’d ever want to see. And it wasn’t even me.”

“I know personally two people that dealt with the hanging of an inmate who died, and they were forced to work a double afterwards with no mental health check . . . cut a man down who is dead—vomit, everything all over you. And you have to work 16 hours in dead vomit-man’s clothes with no offer of assistance. Okay. That can’t weigh very well in the brain. We had quite a few hangings. I had to buy a new pair of boots once because I was in so much blood that it soaked through my boots. And they don’t provide any services for that. None. And smells . . . trigger things. So now I smell certain things and I can smell that cell. So, I mean, they don’t prepare you for the blood on the walls or dodging blood. It’s almost like mental health services are treated in a way that says, ‘we are helping.’ So, if they (CO) go and kill themselves because of what they (a CO) saw, they (administration) are covered legally”

“Very, very often I’d say to the first part. Death. I witnessed attempted suicides on—I’d say in some periods—a monthly to biweekly basis. A lot of prisoners attempt suicide by cutting on themselves. I remember one instance where a prisoner had cut his arms. He bled a lot. That was a lot of blood, and, I still remember he was doing figure-eights, walking in a figure-eight path in his cell, with his arm, the arm that he had cut, extended down to his side to allow for the blood to drip off his arm to coat the floor of his cell in blood. I responded to multiple staff assaults. The first serious staff assault that I can remember that I responded to was where an officer was punched multiple times in the face and torso. I would hear from other officers their account of when a staff—multiple staff members—had gotten stabbed.”

“To this day, for the most part, I’ve been somewhat disconnected from the prison for an extended period of time. A lot of those negative impacts have gone away. I remember right after I decided when my last day was gonna be, and I started going on sick leave and annual leave, and almost instantaneously, I wasn’t throwing up in the mornings anymore. The nightmares went away after maybe a month or two. But the anxiousness is still somewhat there. The alcohol and tobacco use went down after I left, but I still have the hypervigilance, the jumpiness to a lesser extent, but the hypervigilance is still definitely there, even to the extent when I was working at the prison.”

“It is causing a lot of emotional distress. In the way of feeling on edge all the time, anxiety and being very anxious.”

“You don't realize how dark that place is until you leave. The minute you get out, you don't see it even on your vacations. You start feeling normal on your vacations. And then the minute you put that resignation in, it's like the sun comes out. And you're like, oh, I'm free.”

“There's been a few instances where even being out of there for a few months, I still have certain sounds, will kind of bring them back a little bit. I'll have a nightmare. A lot less frequently now, but yeah, they're still there. Something will happen and make me, you know, yeah. Checking corners and looking over my shoulder. I'd say I probably still experience those sometimes a little bit. I get upset with the world around me, difficulty being happy, sleeping was affected. They've gotten better, but yeah. Persistent.”

“There were some people that you could tell did avoid it because they would just stop helping. You know? That was their way of avoiding—they'd sit down on the bottom of the stairs and they just wouldn't come up.”

“I still have anxiety now—I'm in a safer environment with time off and I can actually treat these inmates (at a new facility) how I want to treat them, but when I was at the (MBP) prison, I noticed a big one was when I was talking to family. I would talk to them like inmates. I'd feel myself getting shorter even with family members. Sometimes I get snappy with my dad or my cousin or my mom. And, and I'd be like, you should know this—it's common sense, you know? So definitely heightened irritability. I didn't really lose sleep over the job where some people do. But definitely anxious, hypervigilance and irritability.”

All nine participants stated that they witnessed multiple traumatic events during their time at MBP. Most mentioned increased irritability or anger, hypervigilance and anxiety, lack of sleep, and self-isolation. Not one was unaffected to some extent by their experiences. The two participants that did not report any symptoms consistent with PTSD were ex-military, had the longest careers at the facility, and were not victims of any serious assaults. The participants were very open and expressive in talking about these experiences. They wanted to be heard.

Section 4: Suggestions for Improvement

Current Programs for COs

This last section asked the study participants about what programs are already in place to support COs and inmates, and asked for suggestions to improve conditions at MBP. The only support program that COs mentioned was available to them was the wellness program. It seems to be underutilized, not trusted by many employees, and many do not believe that it is confidential. One former officer said, “I don't know a soul that has called the number.” Another participant goes into more detail about it:

“It feels like an afterthought. We looked at each other like that was kind of fucked up. I don't need to talk to anybody. (Other CO) was like, no, but what if we did? It was like an afterthought. I was like, that's kind of messed up because I've never seen a dead person before. And nobody talked to you at all about it. We did CPR on him (the inmate) . . . and then we got sent with him to the hospital and then we were mandated (forced overtime). We came back just to pick up our vehicles and go back. That's it.”

Another participant who worked at MBP for over a decade stated that didn't really know anything about it at all. It seems that this program is not promoted well or in a positive way.

Suggestions and Solutions to Support Cos

The former COs were asked how the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) and MBP could better support its COs, and this was their list of suggestions.

- Train for Marquette Branch Prison specifically (mentioned by multiple participants).
- Mental health help not prison-funded, separate from the prison.
- “Pretend we're not a number.” Make the employees feel valued and not replaceable.
- So sort of retirement/pension. “Michigan State Police just brought back the hybrid version, and I hear that's pretty popular and people like it” (mentioned by multiple participants).
- Need to compensate people better or differently. There is 401k, but it's inaccessible until a person quits.
- Get rid of the bad COs and hire more people with better incentives.
- Comprehensive training and education on coping with stress and trauma, better access to and less stigma around mental health, and higher-ups checking in on COs after traumatic events.
- Enforce the rules consistently, less leniency for inmates (mentioned by multiple participants).
- “I think the whole system needs to be redone. There should be more policy training. There should be more hands-on training. Whereas the Academy's a lot of reading through policies and learning about blood-borne pathogens—and it's I get that—but teach me how to defend myself. Teach me communication and teach us through scenario-based training.”
- Take the employees' wants and needs into consideration. Don't put the new employees into dangerous situations. Put people where they are most qualified.
- “It starts from the top. You gotta get rid of her (warden) and possibly even the deputy warden—he used to be great.

He used to be supportive of everybody, but he's kind of changed since he's moved up. Nothing else will change there unless you get rid of the—the very, very top. And I don't think that'll happen. I don't understand how she's even there where she's from her prior history, you know? There was a relationship with an inmate—she has a kid with him. Not saying she was part of the escape, but she was in charge of security—she was the deputy security at Ionia when that convict escaped over the fence during Super Bowl weekend. Right after that, she got a promotion to Marquette. So I don't know.”

When asked about solutions to some of the problems mentioned throughout the interview, private mental health counseling was again mentioned and added to by stating that a counselor needs to be specifically trained to counsel COs, and an ex-CO would be even better. The stigma surrounding getting help needs to be addressed. Other suggestions mentioned were having more involvement by the administration—most participants seem to feel that the administration does not care about them and they do not feel valued or heard. The administration needs to listen to the people who are the boots on the ground in the prison, and that is the COs. A potential solution to the severe staffing problem was to have a training facility near Marquette (at the very least in the Upper Peninsula) and to train COs that are going to MBP specifically for that facility. Employee retention is a huge issue as well, and having not only benefits in place to keep employees but also making those employees feel valued would go a long way to retaining them.

MBP has been in the news for only negative topics, one CO stated. They need to work on their public relations and promote a positive experience, but that will be difficult while these issues persist. Most recruiting is done via word of mouth, and if all of the employees are saying negative things, no one is going to want to apply, even with “good” PR.

Regarding addressing the rise in assaults specifically, the participants stated that bringing back vocational training, the dog program, and increasing mental health services to inmates might help. The psychiatrist and counselors are only on-site from about 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. each day, so help is limited after 4:00 p.m. if an inmate has a mental health crisis. Also mentioned several times by participants throughout the interview was consistent and fitting repercussions for inmates when there is an incident. Many COs feel like the administration is putting the inmates' needs before their own.

There are currently some limited programs in place for inmates, mainly in level-I. Food service work, mail-in college, woodworking, and mental health services such as counseling and anger management. Some programs, like the dog program and the violence protection program, have been removed.

Final thoughts

The study participants were asked if they had anything else to add before ending the interview. This participant spoke about why people don't stay.

“Why would you work somewhere that you feel underappreciated and they need to fix that. Like they wonder why no one stays, no one stays because they don't feel heard. They don't feel valued. The pay's not worth it. You can argue that it's one of the best-paying jobs here. And I know that they make the joke that you get paid for 10% of what you do. But that 10% affects a lot.”

Other participants mention the following:

- Consistent and real consequences for bad behavior—the inmates currently think they are untouchable. There are no real consequences.
- Help the public think we're doing great things, i.e. better public image.
- “I got COVID from the prison and they insisted I didn't get it there—the same day over 40 people got it. We were all called by Lansing. Yeah. We all got it. They said, yeah, well you probably got it from someone outside of there. And someone from outside that brought it in—it's all your fault—is what we were told despite my administration. Yeah. There was a whole big thing about it that actually made the news. But I did get it from work, and it would be nice if they would—I'm not trying to sue them—but it would be nice if they just accepted responsibility for that.”
- More consistency between shifts—COs themselves need to enforce the rules consistently and better communication during shift changes. Some people are more strict than others. Most assaults happen during the day and afternoon shifts.
- “I think Marquette's just an animal of its own. I think the administration there favors its residents more than, you know, the people that come there to work on a daily basis.”
- “It's a job where you're hated. No matter what, you go in and the second you put on your uniform, you're the most hated person.”
- “If you're an officer out on the streets, community policing is huge. One out of every five people might not like the police. But you go to work and you have 800 people per 30 people that are working. If they're working short-staffed you have 16 officers working per 800 inmates. Huge target on your back. And you have to go through that every day for the entire time.”
- “There's nothing you can do to make me go back to that place.”

Again, during this final question, there remained consistency in the themes that were mentioned such as administration not valuing its employees, consistency and consequences for inmates, assaults, employee hiring and retention, and MBP being different from other facilities. Public image of MBP and COs was also mentioned, especially in regards to getting people to apply. Overall, while COVID-19 was a factor, many of these issues existed prior to the onset of the pandemic—the pandemic only added to the problem.

Discussion

While the research was intended to explore the resignation reasons of COs during the pandemic at MBP and to assess whether the pandemic had an effect on working conditions, the interviewer discovered that many of the

issues that led to the study participants quitting their jobs were already happening before COVID-19, and the pandemic exacerbated several already present problems. The majority of respondents reported that COVID-19 itself was not a factor that caused them to leave MBP, but it exacerbated an already shaky situation into unsustainability. Increased overtime and poor work-life balance was apparent before the pandemic began because of low staffing levels and difficulty hiring new employees. The biggest factor that COVID-19 had an impact on at MBP was assaults on staff due to inmates having access to large amounts of money from the stimulus checks (putting hits out on COs), inmates being confined and cooped up, strict masking protocols, and administration not enforcing rules consistently or being lax when inmates would break rules.

One major factor that this study attempts to address is the increase in assaults at MBP since 2019. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of assaults by inmates on COs reported to the prosecuting attorney's office in Marquette rose from 37 to 64, 59 were reported in 2021, and as of February 28, 2022, six assaults had already been reported (Anonymous, 2022). Furthermore, in October 2020, COVID-19 ripped through MBP, infecting 42% of the staff at one point and having infected 75% of the inmates since that March (Jackson, 2020). Current anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many factors at play that have contributed to the current situation at MBP, including evidence of severe short-staffing, forced overtime, and inconsistency in adherence to policies and procedures.

One particular aspect of this job the researcher was curious about was if the COs at MBP are given training or tools to cope with their stressful positions, especially during training, before starting their job, or during their employment. Being that working in corrections is known to be stressful and dangerous, having a system that addresses coping skills would seemingly be beneficial to mitigate some of the effects of that stress. However, not a single CO reported any comprehensive training regarding coping with the stress of their position or how to cope with traumatic experiences.

Limitations

The study consisted of nine participants participating in qualitative interviews which lasted between 25 minutes and 1.5 hours. The interviews took place in person, at the participants' homes, and one of limitations to this research is that these are individuals who quit their jobs and were willing to speak to their experiences and so were more motivated by poor work experiences to participate. The number of individuals in the case study is a limiting factor, and due to the lack of cooperation from the Michigan Department of Corrections, the researcher was unable to interview current employees for comparison, and due to time constraints unable to interview former employees who quit before the pandemic. More research needs to be conducted on this population at MBP in addition to other facilities in Michigan to compare experiences across prisons and COs.

Of the two theories utilized in the research to aid in explaining turnover of COs at MBP, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is linear in nature and that in and of itself is a limitation as humans' needs are not always linear. Maslow's theory does, however, touch on that fact and mentions that not every need on every step of the pyramid needs to be met perfectly to move up to the next level. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory is not a linear model, but comes with its own limitations in that it does not address basic needs of the person and is work-specific.

Corrections Officer Turnover and its Relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Overall, the two most significant and reported factors that led to COs resigning from their positions were overtime mandates and staff assaults. Former employees reported having little to no work-life balance and being increasingly stressed due to concerns for themselves and their co-workers' safety. Another significant topic that was discussed was the factor of poor administration and policies. The employees did not feel valued by upper administration (as defined by staff higher up in ranking than Captain), did not feel that the administration cared about them or their well-being, and did not consistently enforce policies and procedures.

Utilizing the theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the two most important needs are physiological and safety/security. These nine former officers were not getting their basic needs met directly due to the conditions of their job—working multiple 16-hour shifts for several days at a time was depriving them of adequate sleep, for example, which is a basic human need that is necessary for physical and mental well-being. The employees did not feel safe or secure at work—safety and security being second on the rung of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and includes safety of body, family, health, and morality, all of which were concerns of these officers (no time for family, decreases in empathy, afraid for their life, negatively impacted physical and mental health). The third most important part of the pyramid concerns friendship, family, and a sense of connection. Going back to the question asked to the COs about relationships, all responded that their relationships were negatively impacted and several mentioned that they experienced difficulty connecting with anyone outside of their co-workers. The fourth aspect of the needs pyramid is about respect and self-esteem, and most of the participants did not feel respected by the prison administration, some COs had negative thoughts about themselves, and some spoke of lack of respect or poor reputation from the community in general and the current societal perception of law enforcement. The peak and final point of the pyramid of needs is about self-actualization, and involves the need for morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem-solving, lack of prejudice, play, and acceptance of facts. Given the situation these officers found themselves in, there was little room to hit the peak of self-actualization. They had little to no time, motivation, physical, emotional, or mental capacity for creativity, play, etc.

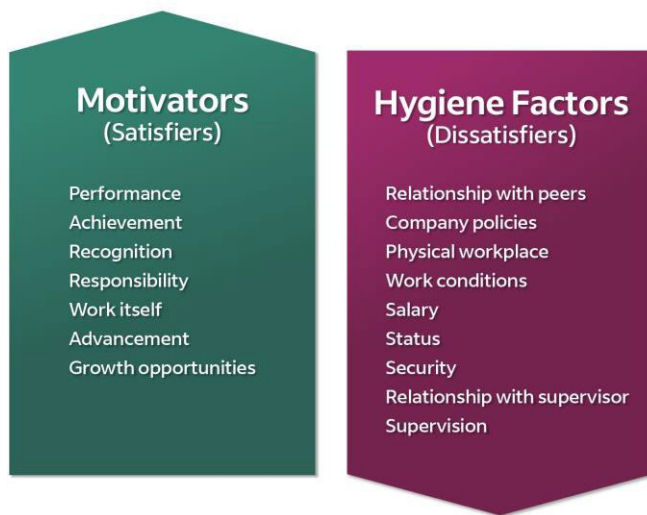


(Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020)

The whole premise of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is that certain needs have to be met in order to meet the needs higher up on the pyramid. A person needs food and sleep before they can think about family and health, for example. Meeting basic needs leads to an increasing level of satisfaction and motivation. The former COs quit their jobs because many of their even most basic needs were not being met directly because of the work environment.

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory and Corrections Officer Job Dissatisfaction

Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory, also called the two-factor motivation theory, is another tool used in this research to explore the motivation or lack thereof of these former COs. In this theory, "hygiene factors" are the absence of factors that lead to job dissatisfaction, such as *not enough* pay, *lack* of job security, *poor* working conditions, *poor* policies and administration, and *lack* of certain benefits. The nine study participants spoke about their dissatisfaction with administration, inconsistent enforcement of policies, lack of fringe benefits (i.e. pension and wellness days), poor/unsafe/stressful working conditions, and lack of work-life balance. These were the main areas in which they experienced dissatisfaction with their job.



(Herzberg's *Motivation Two-Factor Theory*, n.d.)

The COs spoke very little to “motivator factors,” with the exception of a couple of participants mentioning meaningful work. The fact that all the COs had good relationships with their peers is an absence of a hygiene factor, but not in and of itself a motivator factor. The study participants were dissatisfied enough with their jobs to leave—many without having other jobs lined up and some for lesser pay. Not a single participant left specifically for a higher-paying job or a job with better benefits. They left because there was no outside life from work, they did not feel safe, were severely stressed, and did not feel valued at their place of employment. The hygiene factors outweighed the motivator factors in this case.

Suggestions for Improvement

Coping and Mental Health

Considering that the rate of potential PTSD and suicide risk in these former officers is significantly higher than national and state averages for COs, this is of significant concern. The conditions that these individuals have experienced combined with a lack of support and training for coping specifically within this environment are negatively impacting the well-being of Cos at MBP, and leading to the high resignation rates for the facility and decreased mental health for these employees. The researcher would suggest that not only should more thorough research take place at MBP concerning the top factors discussed by the former officers (stress, overtime and short-staffing, assault rates, administrative problems), there should be comprehensive, ongoing trainings and discussions about coping with this job in addition to peer-led support groups. The COs frequently stated that they did not use the current wellness program for various reasons, therefore this program should be explored with the COs at MBP for suggestions for improvement, or the facility needs to allow COs mental health care access that is not run by the department. Trust and confidentiality were often cited as reasons behind not using the current program, as well as stigma surrounding mental health care. Councilors should be either ex-COs or trained specifically to handle the counseling of people in this profession.

Administration

Another suggestion would be the administration taking a larger role in supporting its officers. The COs did not feel valued, heard, or cared about, and this was a major factor in reasons for resigning. The administration could benefit from involving COs in program and policy suggestions and allowing them to give voice to their concerns. COs are the boots on the ground in a prison—they are the ones that interact with inmates on a day-to-day basis. If they hear or see something that is concerning and address it to administration, they should respond accordingly. This also holds true for recruitment and hiring practices. Word-of-mouth is one of the biggest drivers of recruitment, and if the current staff is unhappy they are not going to encourage other people to apply. COs have thoughts and ideas that should be valued and seriously taken into consideration. Administration overall would do well to work hard at making this stressful career less stressful as much as is possible given the job by providing support, positive feedback, incentives, and working towards solutions quickly when there is a problem identified. To borrow a previous quote from a study participant, “Why would you work somewhere that you feel underappreciated? They need to fix that. They wonder why no one stays—no one stays because they don't feel heard. They don't feel valued.” The needs of the inmates should not preside over the needs of those caring for the inmates. It needs to be a balanced system to work. As COs become less motivated and less empathetic because they feel that the department cares more about the inmates than they do their employees, this will affect how the COs treat inmates. It was stated as such by more than one participant.

Retention and Consistency

Keeping current employees is far more beneficial financially to the department than having to train new employees constantly, as well as the fact that low turnover promotes stability and consistency, which the COs stated was a problem, especially in regards to inmates and repercussions/consequences. When there is no consistency between people and shifts, and they are treating inmates or problems differently, there are going to be problems enforcing rules.

Administration needs to not undermine its COs by favoring inmates over staff, and rules should be enforced consistently and fairly. Several COs mentioned that the inmates get away with rule-breaking due to administration not enforcing policies.

Training

Concerning training, many participants stated that they had adequate training, but not for the Marquette facility. Improvement in this area would be suggested that training individuals planning to work at MBP be given specific training regarding what they can expect to experience at this particular facility, and an even better approach would be to have an academy in the Upper Peninsula to attract local residents. Many COs and other staff that work at MBP are locals, and they do not want to spend weeks away from home to attend an academy downstate. Having an academy in the local area would also be cost beneficial as opposed to paying for individuals to travel, and training could be tailored specifically for the facility where employees will be working.

Employee retention would start to address the short-staffing issue, and when COs spoke of what would make them reconsider resigning, several mentioned that there was no incentive to stick around, such as a pension or long-term benefits. In a job such as this—stressful and hazardous—there needs to be incentive for employees to stay. The COs who resigned did not leave for higher-paying jobs, and while a couple mentioned that yes, higher pay *would* be nice, it was not a significant factor. Offering employees a pension, long-term health benefits, bonuses, and an increase in pay would go a long way to retaining good employees in addition to the above-mentioned making them feel valued at work.

Overtime Mandates

The final suggestion is to improve the mandate system and overtime situation in such a manner to allow employees to regain a balanced work-life schedule. Again, retaining employees and making MBP a desirable place to work again would be a good start, however the current situation needs to be addressed first. The more overtime, the more burnout, the higher the turnover. It would be beneficial for the administrators to work with the COs to help find a viable solution to the problem.

Conclusion

Working in corrections is a dangerous career, the people that enter it fully acknowledge that fact. This research was intended to explore the reasons behind the resignation of corrections officers at Marquette Branch Prison during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and compare the data when possible to national and state data. The research done with the nine former officers from MBP highlighted serious concerns within the work environment both before the pandemic and exacerbated by it. Problems most addressed were being short-staffed resulting in excessive forced overtime, increased numbers of assaults on COs leading to fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance, and problems with administration not valuing or listening to COs, which resulted in safety concerns, frustration, and lack of motivation. It can be concluded that there are problems at this facility that were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic with the exception of the significant increase in assaults, largely stemming from inmates having access to stipend money combined with increased stress of the pandemic, short-staffing, and inconsistent enforcement of rules and disciplinary action.

The already-present problems of short-staffing and administration were negatively impacting COs, and the new stress added by the COVID-19 pandemic was the tipping point in regards to pushing workers past their limits and causing them to resign. The results of this case study highlights the need for significant improvements to be made at this facility to address the above-mentioned issues in addition to further research at MBP concerning work conditions and practices, better support for its COs concerning training, mental health, administrative support, and better benefits and incentives to retain employees.

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