

Ethics in criminal justice essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Police and other law enforcement officers deal with the concept of what is right and wrong more often than many other fields. Particularly, correctional officers in prisons and jails often face ethical dilemmas every day (McConnell, 2006). There are many daily scenarios where a correctional officer makes choices that involve their emotions and morals. The practice of making ethical choices is especially important in policing because using your emotions or moral values does not always create a satisfactory solution (Anonymous, 2002). While officers in correctional facilities are in positions of power over prisoners who have made unethical decisions, it is important that they do not abuse this power (Martin, 2001). There are many ethical issues that are very specific to prisons (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2005). One of the biggest ethical issues within correctional facilities is the subject of sexual misconduct (McConnell, 2006).

While in recent years laws have been passed to try and rein in this problem, there are still many complaints made about sexual abuse in prisons and jails; around 60% of those complaints are against facility staff members rather than prisoners (Hunter, 2010). Another issue within correctional facilities is discrimination or misconduct performed by officers pertaining to race and/or gender. Other ethical issues include mistreatment of mentally ill patients as well as drug abuse and trafficking (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2005). It is the duty and obligation of a correctional officer to make responsible, moral, ethical decisions concerning these issues within correctional facilities.

Although prisons are filled with people who are considered unethical, it is important to encourage those people to behave ethically. In order to do this,

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it's important for correctional officers to act morally and respectfully. This way, they can act as a positive role model for prisoners (Misha, 2006). In general, prisoners are considered to be reprehensible and hard. It is theorized that the negative experiences that led them to a correctional facility should, if possible, be made up for with a number of positive experiences on behalf of the correctional officers. While this can often be considered an overly optimistic view, it is still supported as a viable option to explore. In any case, inmates are aware of what their correctional officers say about their colleagues, about the way they act with respect to race, gender, and religious influences and they pay attention to all mistakes made by correctional officers (Misha, 2006).

Therefore, it is the duty of a correctional officer to treat all inmates equally and to follow all guidelines set by their state, no matter how insignificant those guidelines may seem (Martin, 2001). In this way, being a correctional officers is a profession where it is not acceptable to make mistakes. As the saying goes, " You're only as good as your last mistake." This is one of the main reasons that some correctional officers try and cover up their mistakes and/or problem areas instead of requesting assistance (California, 2007). This code of silence, which is especially prominent on the west coast, is easily prevented as long as correctional officers follow the code of ethics and take fault for whatever mistakes have been made.

This is one of the simplest ethical problems within prisons, and is just as simple to solve. Another simple problem is the issue of reciprocity in prisons (Misha, 2006). This is when one or more correctional officers develop a

dependence on prisoners to do their jobs for them. In return for their help, those officers will choose to turn the other way after various infraction. While this can seem like a simple or minor issue, it promotes an unethical or immoral environment in the minds of prisoners. This can also open channels for drug transactions. Although there are measures taken to prevent this, prisoners, sometimes with the help of correctional officers, find ways around these measures. This is how drugs make their way into the prison and are distributed among the prisoners. Drug abuse can often stem from this and sometimes lead to health issues (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2005).

While some inmates may take steps in an attempt to abuse their health care privileges, it is still the duty of correctional officers to allow prisoners to get medical help when it's requested and signs are present supporting their claims. Prisoners are often home to many manners of diseases. For this reason, prisoners must be regarded as susceptible to health problems such as transmissible diseases, mental disorders and suicide (Sciences, 2007).

Even though counseling is provided for inmates who need/or request it, suicide is still a large problem in prison. 24% of all suicides happen within the first 24 hours. It is the duty of correctional officers to watch for signs of depression and keep alert around prisoners as to prevent, if possible, any kind of mental degradation.

There are many problems in prison that are much more extreme, such as physical, verbal, or sexual abuse (McConnell, 2006). Though it may be seen less commonly than codes of silence, there are still many complaints made

of abuse within correctional facilities. As a correctional officer, a fine line should be laid in order to separate the officers from the inmates (Hunter, 2010). Not only does abuse of any kind reflect poorly on the institution, but also on the entire justice system as a whole. Though many could argue that this so-called ‘corporal punishment’ can be helpful in changing prisoners’ views, others would point out that corporal punishment can be detrimental to an inmate’s transgression into a hopefully nonviolent person. Not to mention, those who have been mistreated by the system are much more likely to continue to go against it after their release (Misha, 2006).

While mistreatment of prisoners is in no way justifiable, it can sometimes be a direct result of other ethical issues. An example of this is how correctional officers treat each other. While an old issue, the topic of staff morale in general can have negative consequences and can indirectly lead to one or more of previously mentioned ethical dilemmas. Gary T. Klugiewicz, the director of ACMi® Systems, said in an interview on correctional issues, “If you’d asked me how many inmates that I really hated, I’d say none – they are the way they are and you don’t expect any different. But you ask me how many staff members I hated over my decades in corrections and it would be a very different answer... we don’t support each other, we don’t look out for each other, and then we treat inmates badly because we get treated badly.” (Klugiewicz, 2010)

With this in mind it can be safe to say that not all ethical decisions made by corrections officers in prisons concern treatment of the inmates or self-control. Correctional officers must make an active effort to support each

other. In this way, officers can help their fellow officers to remain ethical while doing so themselves. The opposite can also be said, because with officers looking out for each other and assisting each other, as a correction officer, you could expect support in the case that you have difficulty remaining true to your code of ethics (Klugiewicz, 2010). Also to take into account is the behavior of the prisoner themselves. Inmates are more combative, more willing to take on authority, and more willing to argue in current years than they were forty, thirty, or even simply twenty years ago. Verbal confrontations can easily develop into physical confrontations.

Because of this, it is an obligation of correctional officers to know how to deflect, refocus, and get back on track without getting angry and losing control, while still knowing when words aren't enough and action needs to be taken. Therefore, simply not knowing how to deal with a situation can lead to bad moral choices (Klugiewicz, 2010). Another issue that can result in bad moral choices is funding cuts. While times are hard and money is tight money cuts are certainly required and going to happen. In correctional facilities, there is less money for equipment, fewer staff members, and, as a result, a smaller staff-to-inmate ration. With fewer correctional officers to supervise the prisoners, training becomes an important necessity, but funds for training are often the first to go. An issue that arrives from this is ill-fit staff members.

An example of the damage this can do can be seen with frontline supervisors. Because frontline supervisors evaluate use-of-force incidents, it's important that they have the training, experience, and proper oversight

to do it right. Otherwise, officers can get unfairly punished, or on the contrary, could get away with inappropriate behavior (Klugiewicz, 2010). In conclusion, the topic of ethics in corrections is a complex multi-faceted set of issues. There are many different factors present in correctional facilities that effect the moral decisions made by correctional officers. These factors include prison funds, training, prisoner behavior, updated prisoner information, on the basis of knowing what kind of prisoners you are working with, current conditions of the prison, and even the actions of companion correctional officers (Klugiewicz, 2010).

There are many different moral decisions to be made. While unethical situations have virtually no ability to be justified, it is still a simple matter for officers to slip into those situations and choose, for whatever reason, to act immorally. This is why it is important to be an upright correctional officer requires a certain strength of character, the ability to stand above what is wrong and do what is right, despite whatever appeals are provided by doing the wrong thing.

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