

Working in a total institution



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WORKING IN A TOTAL “ I have heard Graterford called the Farm, the Camp, the Fort, and Dodge but I have never heard it called safe. When I was in the country jail awaiting trial, I saw grown men cry because their counselors told them they were being transferred to Graterford.” – Victor Hassine, (Chevigny, 1999)

These lines echo the trauma and hardships experienced by millions of other prisoners confined to state prisons across the country in the words of Victor Hassine, a prisoner in the Pennsylvania state prison who wrote about his life and times in the prison in his book *Life without Parole*. Prisons have been quite often, referred to as total institutions since they account for the daily aspects of the inmates such as ensuring availability of daily necessities, medical care, rehabilitation amongst several others. The correctional officers employed to supervise the inmates are subjected to rigorous training owing to the occupational hazards their job offers. However considering the personal accounts of several such correctional officers, their personal experiences on the job including their interactions with the prisoners themselves plays a significant role in shaping their role as correctional officers.

According to the personal experience shared by an African American woman in a men’s prison “ The inmates are the ones that helped, taught me how to be an officer. Not the staff. when you are new at the job the inmates are gonna come and tell you, “ Ma’am, you left a door open” or “ Somebody’s sick”. Because you can’t be at two places at the same time. Nine times out of ten its gonna be the inmates that tells you what’s going on” (Britton, 2003 Pp. 95)

According to the American Correctional Association, the correctional officers
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receive training at an average of 262.8 hours in the field of first aid, self defense, race relations as well as other practically relevant subject areas (Levinson, Pp. 327). However, the personal accounts of the correctional officers suggest that a majority of inmates share a mutual interest with the officers in terms of maintaining a day to day routine and since they are clearly more knowledgeable than the newly appointed officers they gladly extend their co-operation in maintaining the in prison routines. Besides it has also been reported and confirmed on the basis of substantial amount of research conducted in that behalf, that several officers in training perceive such a training as a form of exaggerated depiction of violence and crime that might be encountered as a part of their jobs especially by those officers who underwent training in the state prisons. The young recruits are often made to listen to war stories as a part of their training being told by senior officers that tend to depict the alleged violence inside the prisons and also shown films depicting the life inside prisons as correctional officers. Such training instills fear in the trainee officers who are most often compelled to quit on ground of excessive violence which tend to portray the inmates as some kind of violent animals. Also the training is often biased towards males which further categorize it as a gendered occupation implying that women might not be suitable for the job since the job supposedly demands physical and mental toughness - an inherent male quality. However since the past decade the system has undergone several changes with fewer incidences of violence and a substantial reduction in inmates to officer ratios, with the system representing a more bureaucratic and regulated structure.

References

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