



# LIKELY TO STAY OR BOUND TO LEAVE?

Exploring prior  
work histories of  
correctional  
officer recruits

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**D**espite the longstanding issues recruiting and retaining correctional officers, there is limited research examining the characteristics of those hired to work in our nation’s prisons. Specifically, little is known about the occupational histories of those who are hired to work behind prison walls. Given the alarming turnover rate in this occupation and costs incurred by state departments when officer’s leave the job, which by all accounts are disconcertingly high, this omission warrants consideration.<sup>1</sup>

Previous studies find it is common for individuals to drift into — and out of — careers.<sup>2</sup> Although this may be true in many industries (e.g., customer service, general labor), it is very costly for the corrections sector. Research estimates state departments lose between \$20,000 and \$31,000 from training fees, recruitment and onboarding costs for each correctional officer that resigns.<sup>3,4</sup> To combat this expensive reality, some jurisdictions attempt to hold correctional officers contractually liable for their training by requiring a time-based commitment on the job. For example, Ohio has developed an initiative whereby officers must serve for four years or pay back \$5,000 to offset training costs.<sup>5</sup> While this initiative may lead to lower turnover rates, other efforts may prove more fruitful.

The corrections sector should prioritize recruiting and hiring individuals that provide evidence they will stay at the job. Given that prior behavior is a relatively reliable indicator of future behavior, fully examining the occupational histories and tenure of prospective correctional officers could give states more confidence in who they hire. Working as a correctional officer is different than virtually every other occupation (e.g., higher rates of stress, risks of physical injury). However, assessing the prior employment of correctional officer applicants might assist hiring managers in gaining a “sense” of how these individuals may fare as correctional officers. Put differently, departments could better answer a crucial question: Are new recruits likely to leave in a short period of time on the job because that is what they have done in their previous jobs?

## The importance of work histories

In our sample of newly hired correctional officers from three states, we find that 96.6% of them had a job

immediately prior to their new position as an officer. Thus, it is evident nearly everyone has a work history prior to entering the correctional officer occupation. A relatively understudied question of those entering work as correctional officers in the United States is: Why? Scholars have alluded to the term “career drift” to describe entry into the field of corrections.<sup>6</sup> Drifters can be distinguished as those who “float” and those who “flow” from career to career. According to Kato and Suzuki, “floating implies no conscious concern with a career path.”<sup>2</sup> Flowing is more purposive and allows for a career quest.” “Flow-ers” may be those with occupational backgrounds in human services, law enforcement or military. “Floaters” likely have backgrounds in any manner of occupations, with evidence of haphazard resignation and job seeking. Our data allow us to examine whether a large sample of newly hired correctional officer either flowed or floated into the career and the average amount of time these individuals worked in their previous jobs. These findings have direct implications for state departments, whose goal is to hire individuals likely to stay, rather than those bound to leave.

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## Study design

The current study comprehensively explores the prior work experiences of 673 individuals that were hired to work as correctional officers in one Southern and two Midwestern states in 2017–2018. All correctional officer trainees were surveyed during their time in basic training. The sample is 68.8% male, 67.2% White, and 26.8%

Black, with an average age of 30.31 years. Furthermore, 30.8% of the sample has a High School Diploma/GED, with 27.3% of the sample having an Associates/Bachelor's Degree. Our sample demographics are similar to the population of correctional officers in the United States, which indicate 70% of the workforce is male and 57% are White.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is less likely our sample is simply unique; we would expect to find these results from other officers across different states.

To document occupational histories, respondents were asked "Prior to applying for this position, what were your previous three occupations and how long were you employed in those positions?" They were additionally asked "What interests you most about the position you are currently in training for?" Respondents were provided with a separate line for each occupation to guide their responses. To ensure best practices were followed, each of the responses was reviewed by two members of the research team to define categories for the prior occupations listed by the respondents.

We defined "floaters" as those whose work histories indicated they chose jobs haphazardly, with little evidence of career path/trajectory. Specifically, these were the individuals in our sample who did not have prior

experience in occupations conducive to corrections work (e.g., human service, military, criminal justice, or security-related positions) and those who did not express motivations for choosing to be a correctional officer related to corrections work (e.g., wanting a criminal justice career, keeping the community safe), and instead stated they came to the career for "the pay/benefits." An example of a "floater" in our sample worked at Sam's Club for four months, worked at a moving company for 24 months and worked at Walmart for 27 months. They were interested in being a correctional officer because of "retirement benefits."

Conversely, "flow-ers" were defined as those whose work histories reflected mindful application to positions with a career trajectory in mind. An example of a "flower" in our sample worked at a GED reentry program for 48 months, worked at a juvenile correctional facility for 24 months, and worked security for 12 months. They indicated they wanted to work as a correctional officer in order to "help rehabilitate offenders." Thus, we defined "flow-ers" in our sample as those who came directly from corrections-related position or those who expressed motivations related to corrections work (e.g., wanting to help rehabilitate offenders).



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## Results

### Prior Occupations

Our sample of correctional officer trainees came from, in order of the most individuals to the least, the following industries: service industry (25.4%), manual labor (23.4%), human services (13.8%), administrative (11.1%), criminal justice (7.8%), security (6.3%), skilled labor (5.7%), those that reported no prior occupation (3.4%) and military (3.1%).

### Floater versus Flow-ers

In our sample, 48.6% of the newly hired officers had never held a military, human service, criminal justice or security-related position. For this reason, their job histories indicated they “floated” into this occupation, as their work histories did contain corrections-related experiences. After excluding those who reported criminal justice/corrections-related motivations for becoming correctional officers, 199 fewer trainees fit the definition, making 21.9% of the sample “floaters.” Moreover, 30.7% (n = 207) of the sample had come directly from corrections-relevant positions, making their work histories resemble those flowing into the position. After including those who reported motivations relevant to corrections work, an additional 142 trainees fit the definition of “flow-ers,” for a total of 51.7% “flow-ers.”

### Length of prior employment

The average length of employment in prior jobs for the officers in our sample was just over two years (25.4 months). The median length of employment over their last three jobs was 14 months (just over one year). Our findings also reveal those whose histories indicate floating tended to stay for an average of 25.8 months at past jobs, while non-“floaters” stayed 30.6 months. Regardless of how it is measured, this trend is disconcerting. Turnover in officers is a major problem in the corrections sector, with turnover rates as high as 25% over three years.<sup>4</sup> One state saw a turnover rate of 56% in a single year.<sup>1</sup> If past behavior predicts future behavior, a short tenure as a correctional officer should not be surprising.

## Concluding remarks

State departments of correction should be cognizant of the occupational histories of those they decide to hire. Our findings reveal nearly 50% of individuals come into corrections without any prior experience conducive to correctional officer work. Given the challenges of prison work (e.g., stress, danger), departments might want to consider attending to the “shock” experienced by new officers who “float” into the position.

Occupational histories are also important to understand as they are likely to predict future occupational outcomes. State departments of correction could use this information in an effort to know if newly hired correctional officers, those that they paid thousands of dollars to train, are likely to stay or bound to leave their jobs. As training of officers is a costly investment, sorting out “floaters” from the “flow-ers” can make this investment more likely to pay off in the future. Three factors have the potential to result in less risk-averse hires.

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First, state departments may want to not only pay close attention to the prior work histories of those applying but also their motivations for doing so. This could allow departments to evaluate whether these individuals drifted into this position for better pay/benefits compared to their old job, or if they are motivated to do correctional work for other reasons (e.g., to help people). Second, departments may want to focus on instilling in those they hire the value and purpose of the occupation. In so doing, the newly hired officers may begin to think of their new job as a career, rather than a job. This could be done during the training academy experience.

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Third, state departments might focus on effectively recruiting individuals from industries conducive with correctional officer work. A 2018 national survey revealed seven in ten states recruit military networks; however, only about 10% of our sample had prior military experience.<sup>8</sup> Stronger emphasis recruiting military, human service and criminal justice-specific networks may prove useful. Given the expansion of the correctional officer's role in contemporary prisons, individuals should be sought that are problem solvers, leaders, communicators, effective at resolving conflicts, high in emotional intelligence and able to assist people in improving themselves. Thus, those whose occupational backgrounds speak to these skills could be targeted by state departments.

In summary, correctional officers are critical for the security, safety and rehabilitative potential of our nation's prisons. However, the United States is facing a crisis in the hiring of corrections officers. After more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and stiff competition for workers, America is facing an unprecedented correctional officer shortage. Although it may be tempting to hire any person who applies to the job, we caution this may be an expensive endeavor. Instead, our work suggests hiring decisions should strive to seek out "flow-ers," rather than "floaters." By avoiding those whose work histories indicate they are bound to leave and hiring those who are likely to stay, state departments of correction could avoid needless training expenses due to high rates of turnover, resulting in a more stable and motivated workforce.

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