

CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINING AND ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

THE INITIATIVE The Moss Group, Inc. (TMG), in conjunction with BJA, is committed to supporting the development of the essential skills and knowledge needed to reflect the unique and demanding challenges of training today's corrections workforce. Through the BJA initiative, Improving Institutional Corrections Academy Training, TMG is conducting a national scan consisting of on-site observations, surveys, and curriculum evaluations. TMG will examine training academies' focus, content, and quality and develop guidance for building and supporting correctional staff to increase public safety by improving outcomes across the corrections community.

THE SURVEY

TMG's Steering Committee of subject matter experts helped develop the corrections staff survey. To ensure a comprehensive scan, we developed and delivered a targeted online survey to officers in different career stages throughout multiple states, including Texas (n = 248 officers), Michigan (n = 112 officers), Maine (n = 22 officers), South Carolina (n = 96 officers), and Maryland (n = 14 officers). In total, 528 officers participated in our survey request.

The survey was designed to gather qualitative and quantitative responses from a wide variety of participants within the corrections workforce. It included questions to assess perceptions of training, values, and prison climate. Responses were collected from November 2022 through June 2023.

We present these data in terms of the percentage of staff agreeing with six statements that assess perceptions toward training, values, and prison climate. All six statements were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where one indicates they strongly disagree and five indicates strongly agree. The responses are broken down by career tenure to examine whether officers at different career stages perceive these topics.

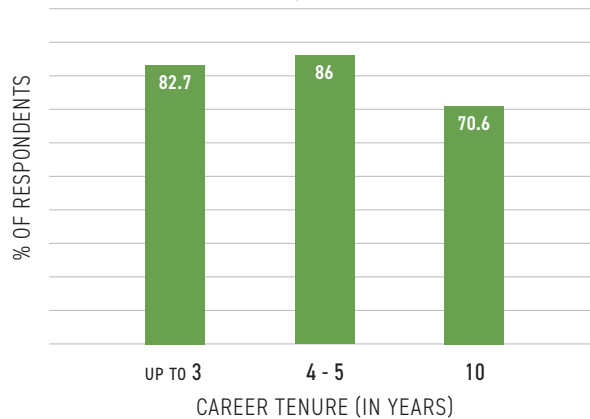
This project was supported by Grant No. 2019-RY-BX-K002, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

KEY FINDINGS

Figure 1 shows the percentage of officers who agree, "I feel confident in the training that I received." As shown, more than 80 percent of officers that have been on the job for at least three months and up to five years are confident in the training that they received. For the officers that have been on the job for ten or more years, fewer of them felt confident about their training. Thus, newer officers were generally more likely to feel confident in their training than senior officers.

I FEEL CONFIDENT IN THE TRAINING I RECEIVED

Figure 1



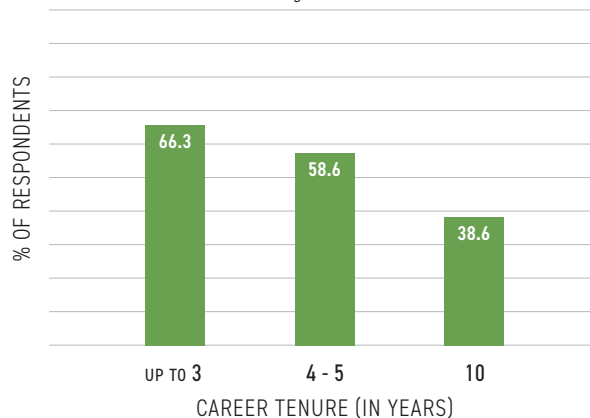
2X
Staff with 3 months on the job reported training had prepared them almost twice as much as officers with 10 years on the job

STAFF STRESS, SAFETY, AND SUPPORT

Due to the stressful nature of corrections work, we examined whether the corrections staff agreed that training prepared them to cope with the stress of their job. As shown in figure 2, a noticeable decline in agreement for this item can be seen as officers' career tenure increases. Specifically, the average level of agreement that training prepared officers to cope with the stress of the job decreases in every category of career tenure as it increases. Remarkably,

THE TRAINING I RECEIVED PREPARED ME TO COPE WITH THE STRESS OF THE JOB

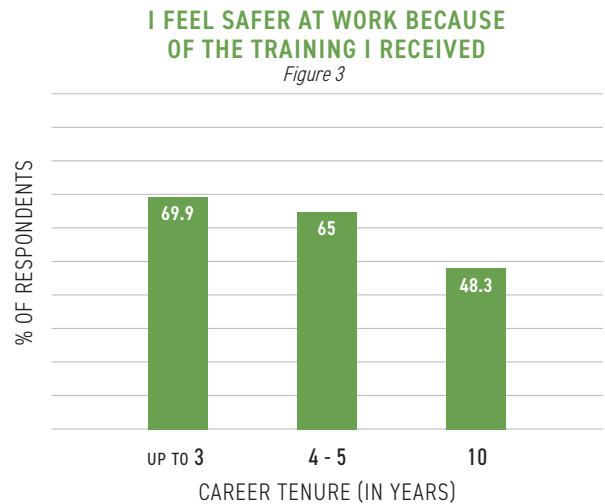
Figure 2



agreement with the statement for someone who has three months on the job is virtually double that of officers that have been on the job for ten years (73.7 versus 38.5 percent, respectively).

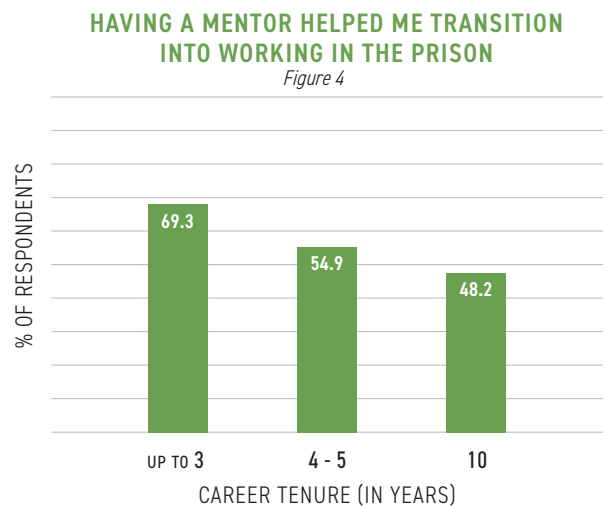
AS OFFICERS' TENURE INCREASES, IT APPEARS THEIR PERCEPTION THAT TRAINING HELPED THEM FEEL SAFER AT WORK DECREASES

Regarding safety, figure 3 shows the percentage of officers agreeing that they feel safer at work due to the training they received. A similar trend is revealed that was observed with stress. As officers' tenure increases, it appears their perception that training helped them feel safer at work decreases. Those feeling the safest because of training have been on the job the least, and those feeling the least safe have been on the job longer. One point to note is the percentage of officers that do not agree that training has made them feel safer (i.e., those not shown in the figure). Generally, 27 to 52 percent of officers do not feel safer due to the training they received.



USING A MENTOR TO TRANSITION INTO WORKING IN A PRISON IS REPORTEDLY LESS HELPFUL FOR TENURED STAFF

In addition to examining the officers' perceptions toward basic training, we also probed how they felt about the mentorship they received when beginning their careers as officers. The rationale for a mentor is that most people who enter corrections have little to no experience working in a prison environment. As shown in figure 4, approximately 65 to 78 percent of officers in their first three years of work agree that having a mentor helped them transition into working in a prison. Officers with more career tenure, such as five and ten years, agree less that a mentor helped them (54.9 and 48.2 percent, respectively).



ALIGNING VALUES AND IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED

In addition to perceptions of training and how it affected various aspects of their job (e.g., confidence, feeling safe), we also examined whether officers' values differ by the amount of time they have been working as corrections officers. Throughout the corrections field, we have heard that some senior officers' values and attitudes do not align with their organizations. Moreover, we hear that junior officers find themselves in a predicament when coming out of the training

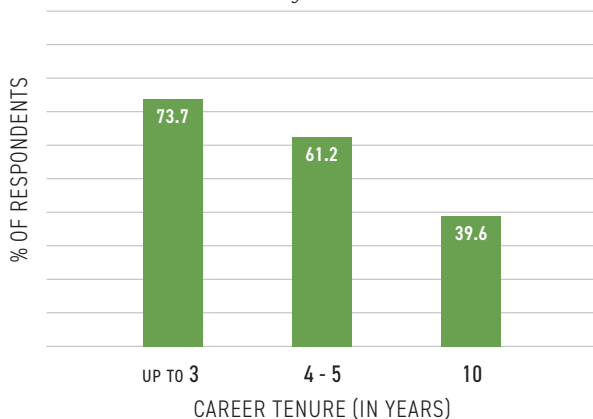
academy, having heard one thing and then hearing something different from the senior staff at their new institution. To probe this topic, we asked officers whether they agree that their values and the facility's values they work for are very similar. As shown in figure 5, there is a discrepancy between the amount of time officers have worked for the organization and their values being congruent with.

As shown, officers coming out of the academy have the greatest level of congruence in values between themselves and their facilities. However, as career tenure increases, a noticeable decrease in value congruence is observed. Specifically, when moving from six months to 60 months, a decline in agreement that the statement of three percent can be observed from each group of officers. Less than 40 percent of officers with ten or more years of career tenure agree that their values and their facilities are very similar.

In addition to diverging values between junior and senior-level staff, another issue from the field is the belief held by officers that improving prisons for people who are incarcerated cannot result in better conditions for staff. To assess this notion, we asked the officers whether they agreed with the idea that if prisons are improved for people who are incarcerated, it will make them worse for staff. Overall, there was not a high endorsement of this belief. However, of note are the differences in agreement when examining the officers by career tenure. For example, the responses shown in figure 6 report only 2.4 percent of newly hired officers believe this to be true. Agreement with this idea increased for virtually all officers at different points in their careers. For example, at ten years on the job, more than 30 percent of officers believe that improving prisons for people who are incarcerated makes them worse for staff.

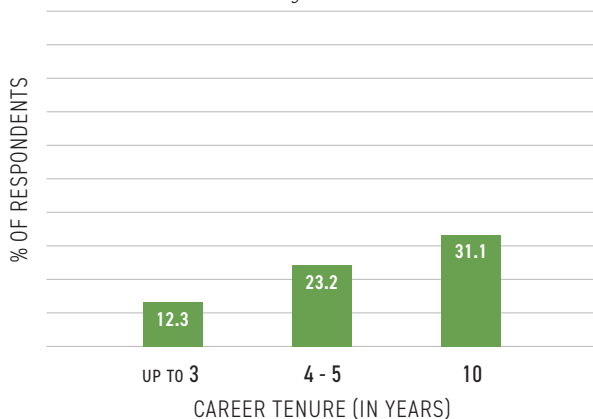
I FIND THAT MY VALUES AND THE FACILITY VALUES ARE VERY SIMILAR

Figure 5



IMPROVING PRISONS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED MAKES THEM WORSE FOR STAFF

Figure 6



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is our hope that the field uses these findings to consider how officers within their own institutions might respond to these topics. Are training academies from other states observing similar results? Are they observing different results? It would behoove state departments to explore these issues. We believe that doing so will create a better environment for those working and living in our nation's correctional institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Consider elective courses that further professional growth and address emerging and trending issues in the department and facility.
2. Assess staff wellness access and use by tenured staff.
3. Conduct a survey on how to better support safety on the job for staff.
4. Assess staff mentoring programs for effectiveness and support in transitioning to a correctional environment.
5. Develop departmental values statement in partnership with staff and ensure the values are supported and modeled by all levels of staff.
6. Develop educational and information bites that highlight the benefits and anticipated outcomes of facility and programming improvements for people who are incarcerated.