

Special Edition Editorial: The health and wellbeing of prison staff

This edition is guest-edited by **Professor Karen Harrison**, a Professor of Law and Penal Justice, and **Dr Lauren Hall**, a Lecturer in Criminology, both at the University of Lincoln.

This special edition of the Prison Service Journal places a magnifying glass over the working environments, cultures, and health implications of employment in the prison estate. The COVID-19 pandemic caused chaos for prison estates globally; being largely ill-equipped to handle infectious diseases, the ripple effects on incarcerated people and staff alike were life-changing. Although hugely impactful however, the pandemic did not simply create a host of new problems for prison staff, it also crystallised and exacerbated a range of existing problematic practices. Working in prisons brings its own set of 'pains of imprisonment'¹ for staff, with a number of documented stressors associated specifically with this environment. American research has shown for example that for prison officers comparatively to other workers, evidence of neuroticism is significant, and that this neuroticism increases with length of employment,² implicating the capacity of the prison environment to effect negative personality changes.

The roles of prison staff are multi-faceted and have evolved over time, slowly expanding the job parameters to include disciplinarian, rehabilitator, diplomat and more.³ Within contexts of prison overcrowding and underfunding therefore, it is understandable that a range of complex and interlocking factors are contributing to challenging working environments and high levels of staff turnover. The relationship between workplace wellbeing and staff retention is well accepted, however it has been argued that mechanisms of increasing wellbeing at work are still broadly underutilised.⁴ There is an awareness within the prison estate of the need for more proactive supports for prison staff, and more celebration of success and strengths, however there is a parallel acknowledgment

of the efforts and investment required for people to thrive and the associated challenges that come with this. Some degree of autonomy and flexible working can be associated with increased work wellbeing,⁵ however such features are difficult to secure when working in prisons. Not only is autonomous working a challenge within the regimented prison environment, but articles in this edition point to the further restricting effects of unhealthy workplace culture in having space to act on wellbeing problems.

Articles in this special addition bring attention to the importance of healthy workplace cultures in overcoming toxic macho cultures of overwork, resultant limited coping strategies, and the range of negative impacts on social and family life. The 24-7 nature of the organisation increases its permeation into people's lives, meaning that people work longer hours, spending less quality time with families, and experience an increased sense of responsibility to be present and continue working even whilst unwell. To capture these issues, we start this special edition with an article written by **Professor Karen Harrison** and **Dr Helen Nichols**, which focuses on a qualitative study of the health and wellbeing of governor grade staff, which the authors, plus a wider team, completed in 2021. Detailed in the article, we are told how general wellbeing is not good, with issues such as workload, work/life balance, and the prison culture discussed. Using the same data set, **Dr Lauren Smith** in the second article, builds on this and explains how for some governors this has led to a path to disenchantment, with there being a real need for HMPPS to start creating reenchanting workplaces.

Moving from prison governors to prison officers, article 3, written by **Dr Andrew Clements** and

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1. Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press
 2. Suliman, N., & Einat, T. (2018). Does Work Stress Change Personalities: Working in Prison as a Personality-Changing Factor among Correctional Officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 45(5), 628–643.
 3. Forsyth, J., Shaw, J., & Shepherd, A. (2022). The support and supervision needs of prison officers working within prison environments. An empty systematic review. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 33(4), 475-490–490.
 4. Walker, L., Braithwaite, E. C., Jones, M. V., Suckling, S., & Burns, D. (2023). "Make it the done thing": an exploration of attitudes towards rest breaks, productivity and wellbeing while working from home. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 1–13.
 5. Walker, L., Braithwaite, E. C., Jones, M. V., Suckling, S., & Burns, D. (2023). "Make it the done thing": an exploration of attitudes towards rest breaks, productivity and wellbeing while working from home. *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 1–13.

Professor Gail Kinman provides an overview of wellbeing amongst prison officers, using surveys that were conducted in 2014 and 2020. Mirroring the negative findings above, the surveys found evidence of presenteeism (working when unwell) and officers being exposed to the psychosocial hazards of high job demands and psychological distress. This is supported by article 4, written by **Sydney Ward** and **Dr Lauren Smith**, which utilises survey data to discuss the key factors impacting prison officer wellbeing. Focusing on prison officer burnout, the article looks at the relationship between PTSD, Depression, and Resilience.

Article 5 then takes us to Australia, written by **Professor Mark Nolan**, where we find similar findings in terms of the wellbeing of correctional officers there. Focusing on the States of New South Wales and Victoria, the article also looks at what support strategies are in place for officers, with this being the start of a shift in focus to what is working well in terms of interventions. In Australia, one of the main programmes is Stand TALR (Talk, Ask, Listen, Refer), with the article also covering a number of other strategies and interventions. This is followed by article 6, written by **Vicki Cardwell** and **Polly Wright**, which discusses the Spark Inside Prison Staff Coaching programme and how this has been beneficial to staff across all prison grades. Finally, and in acknowledgement that it is not just prison officers and governors who work in prisons the final article, by

Rachael Mason and **Lucy Morris**, looks at the health and wellbeing of healthcare staff in prisons, with a focus on recommendations for what can be done in the future.

This special edition also includes two interviews: one with **Chris Jennings**, Executive Director Wales and Chair of the HMPPS Wellbeing Group and, the second with **Priscilla Wong**, Head of Occupational Health, and Employee Assistance Programmes at the Ministry of Justice. Both discuss what HMPPS are doing in terms of supporting prison staff in their health and wellbeing. Finally, the edition concludes with two book reviews, one for 'Caged Emotions: Adaptation, Control and Solitude in Prison' by Ben Laws and the other 'The Prison Psychiatrist's Wife' by Sue Johnson.

Although it is difficult to design broad enough supports given the range of roles and their unique associated challenges for prison staff in various positions, it should not be regarded as an impossibility. Camaraderie and working together are, for many, identified features of working for the prison estate, demonstrating that despite working in what can be oppressive and harmful environments, staff still show the capacity to express support and solidarity to one another. Further urgent formal action is generally still required however, and the research and insights presented here aim to illuminate, acknowledge, and inform of the challenges, impacts, and required steps towards improved prison work-lives.