

# Recruitment and retention of correctional staff

A national survey of challenges and strategies

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## Introduction

There is widespread agreement that staff are essential to any correction agency's overall mission and purpose. Job stress, job satisfaction, and staff commitment are the three most frequently examined outcomes of correctional personnel in scholarly research.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, concern over high vacancy and turnover rates over the last few years have made recruitment and retention a critical priority.<sup>2</sup> The Research Council of the American Correctional Association (ACA) conducted a survey of correctional agencies across the United States regarding each state's vacancy and turnover situation. Responses were received from 23 states (one representative per state). Agency population sizes ranged from 1,284 to 119,329 incarcerated individuals and 1,510 to 357,552 probation/parolees.

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## All agency respondents reported experiencing higher than normal vacancies among Correctional officers.

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The ACA Research Council survey revealed security officer vacancy rates reached a high of 55% and turnover rates as much as 48%. On the probation/parole side, community corrections officer vacancy rates were lower at 16%, with turnover rates at a maximum 28%. Overall, the vacancy rates in the survey were up to 42% for both groups together, with turnover rates as high as 34%. These turnover rates are higher than reported in past research of 12-25% annual correctional officer turnover.<sup>3</sup> All agency respondents reported experiencing higher than normal vacancies among Correctional officers. At the same time, other sectors were still short. For example,

70% of agencies reported higher than normal vacancies for healthcare workers, 65% for mental health staff, and 52% in buildings/maintenance. Only 35% of agencies had higher than normal vacancies for programs/reentry with technology, research, and education at only 20%.

## Does training impact recruitment and retention?

Agencies were asked questions about basic/preservice and in-service training for security officers in prisons and the same set of questions for probation/parole officers in the community. We sought to determine whether training had a meaningful impact on recruitment or retention.

### Basic training

Basic training for all officers ranged between two to 15 weeks long, with eight weeks being the most common length. Basic training was held at a regional or state operated academy and consisted of online modules integrated into classroom training. Security officers in 17 out of 23 states (74%) were obligated to purchase their own work boots and a belt/equipment. Of these 17 states, 10 also required the security recruit to finance all training-related travel expenses. New probation/parole officers in only eight states (35%) were required to purchase work shirts/jackets and/or finance travel expenses. Vacancy and turnover rates were averaged in states with and in states without financial obligations for each staff group. States that required probation and parole officers to buy a uniform had higher turnover (11.9% vs. 13.9%) and vacancy rates (9.6% vs. 8.9%) than states that did not require treatment employees to make work-related purchases. However, for correctional officers, the result was the opposite. States that required correctional officers to purchase equipment, boots, or pay for travel had lower turnover (26.7% vs. 32.9%) and vacancy rates (20.5% vs. 27.6%) than states that required no financial obligations of new security staff.

### In-service training

After the initial hire, all officers were required to attend 40 hours of in-service training per year, to include weapon requalification if applicable, specialty topics, and any legal or policy changes. For security officers, 15 out of 23 states used a combination of online modules and

in person training at the academy or at the prison unit. In-service training for probation/parole officers was most often completed in the office, and combined online and in person learning.

## Recruitment

The survey included questions about recruitment strategies utilized and the efficacy of those strategies using a three-point scale: “Did Not Help,” “Helped Some,” “Helped a Lot.” Additionally, respondents were asked about *specific* compensation strategies and their efficacy using the same three-point scale. We wanted to better understand widely used strategies and determine what efforts agencies found successful or fruitless.

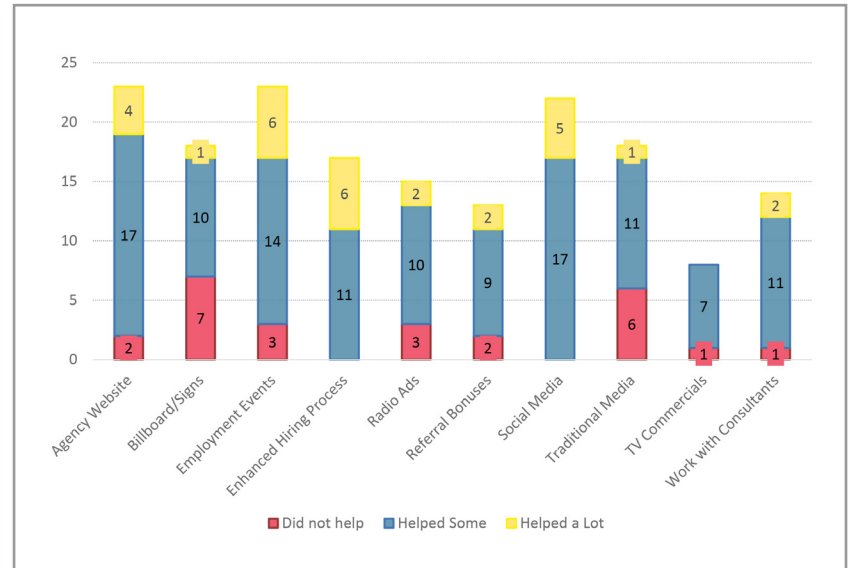
### General recruitment strategies

The following recruitment strategies were assessed for utilization and efficacy: job posts on the agency website, billboards/signs, employment events, enhanced hiring practices, radio advertisements, referral bonuses, signing bonuses, social media posts, traditional media, television commercials, and work with consultants (*see Figure 1*). The most widely used strategies for reporting agencies included: job posts on the agency website (100%), employment events (100%), social media posts (96%), billboards/signs (78%), and traditional media (78%). Interestingly, every recruitment strategy listed in the survey had more favorable responses (Helped Some or Helped a Lot) than unfavorable responses (Did not Help).

The majority of agencies reported the following strategies as helpful: enhanced hiring practices (100%), social media posts (100%), work with consultants (93%), and job posts on the agency website (91%). Agencies were also provided with the option to write-in strategies. The most helpful strategies mentioned were facility/local recruitment teams, open house events/job fairs, rehiring retirees, and using the publicsafety.com application.

The least helpful strategies included: billboards/signs (39%), traditional media (33%), and radio advertisements (20%). It is important to note that *none* of the general recruitment strategies were correlated with vacancy or turnover rates.

Figure 1: Efficacy of Recruitment Strategies (n=23)



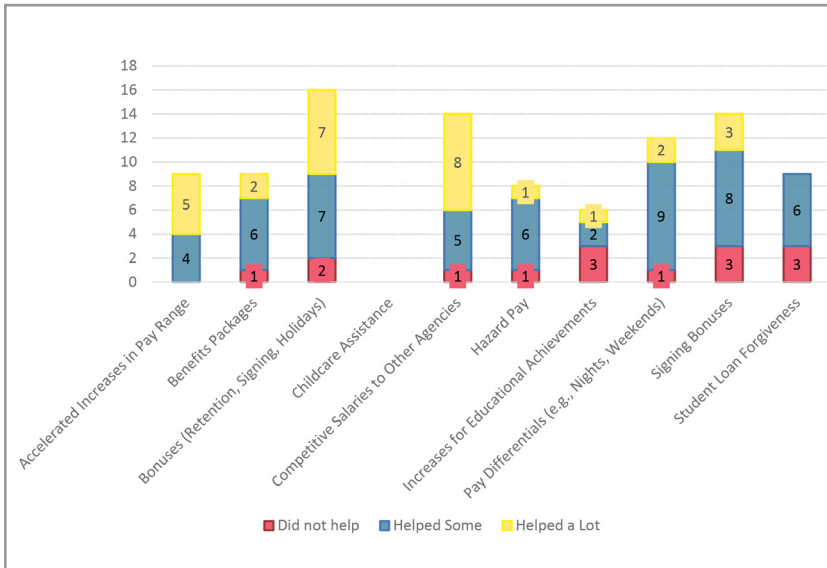
### Compensation strategies for recruitment

According to Figure 2, the following compensation recruitment strategies were assessed for utilization and efficacy: accelerated increases in pay range, benefits packages, bonuses (retention, signing, holidays), child-care assistance, competitive salaries to other agencies, hazard pay, pay increases for education achievement, pay differentials (e.g., nights, weekends), and student loan reimbursement. The most widely used strategies for reporting agencies included: bonuses (70%), competitive salaries to other agencies (61%), and pay differentials (52%). With the exception of increases for educational achievements, all compensation recruitment strategies listed in the survey were reported to be more helpful than unhelpful.

The most helpful strategies identified by the agencies were: accelerated increases in pay range (100%), competitive salaries to other agencies (93%), and pay differentials (92%). Similar to the recruitment strategies question discussed earlier, respondents were provided with a write-in option. The most helpful strategies mentioned were pay incentives for overtime, statewide pension plans, allowances for paying tolls, and increased minimum wages.

The least helpful strategies for participating agencies were increases for educational achievements (50%),

**Figure 2: Compensation Recruitment Strategies and Efficacy (n=23)**



**Table 1: Retention Factors Ranked by Percentage of Positive Responses**

Factor Impacting Retention	Positive to Negative Ratio	% Positive Responses
Enhanced Benefits	12:0	100%
Recognition Awards	10:0	100%
Benefits	13:1	92.9%
Training/Career Path Preparation	12:1	92.3%
Early Retirement	5:2	71.4%
Pay	12:9	57.1%
Policy Wavers/Changes	5:4	55.6%
Contracts	4:4	50.0%
Competitive Job Opportunities	6:12	33.3%
Work Schedules	4:15	26.7%
Job Location	2:12	14.3%
Security/Safety Concerns	1:16	5.9%
Required Overtime	1:20	4.7%

student loan reimbursement (33%), and signing bonuses (27%). Childcare assistance was the only strategy not utilized by any of the responding agencies. None of the compensation recruitment strategies were correlated with vacancy or turnover rates.

### Factors impacting retention

Table 1 illustrates various factors that either positively or negatively impacted retention. Four factors had a positive impact by more than half of the states surveyed: benefits (57%), enhanced benefits (52%), pay (52%), and career path training/preparation (52%). While pay was mentioned to have a positive impact on retention by 12 states, pay was also mentioned to have a negative impact almost as often (n = 9; 39%). To get a clearer picture of which factors had the clearest impact, the following table eliminated all “no impact” responses and ranked each of the thirteen job retention factors by percentage of responses indicating an improvement in retention. Some factors such as pay are out of the DOC’s control, given that pay rates are largely determined by the Governor’s Office and the Legislature.

Another example is employee recognition. Quantum Workplace writes that organizations with formal recognition programs have 31 percent lower voluntary turnover. They also recommend that recognition is given “authentically...in real time”.<sup>4</sup> The Idaho Department of Corrections reported the effectiveness of recognizing their employees at little to no cost. Recognition is backed up in interviews with correctional officers (CO) such as one CO who summarized it this way:

*This is the most thankless job, without a doubt. ... But if you don't see any positive feedback and you don't see anything positive out there, it reflects in here. ... And it beats everybody down in there ... you need that recognition. Everybody needs that recognition. Because it perks you back up, makes you feel like you're on the right track. It makes you feel like what you're doing is worth it and valued.*<sup>5</sup>

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Our survey found that required overtime was the most negatively rated tactic that impacted retention. While overtime can be a welcomed supplement to existing pay, required overtime can be a substantial burden. Obvious safety and security issues exist with staff shortages, but tactics to get through existing shortages may be counter-productive if they lead to further turnover. Related to that, agencies might wish to consider flexible scheduling to promote work-life balance. Another solution might be to focus on breaks within shifts or breaks between shifts to allow COs to check their messages, call home, rest, or exercise. The MTC Institute discussed how agencies might consider part-time CO positions or a condensed 4-day workweek.<sup>6</sup> Condensed workweeks can improve work/life balance without sacrificing employee productivity – especially among employees already used to working shifts longer than eight hours.<sup>7</sup> It may also be necessary to address rotating schedules if they undermine the benefits of condensed workweeks.

### Factors impacting turnover

We asked respondents to list the top three reasons that employees cited for leaving their job. According to Table 2, they are the lack of work/life balance, pay, and lack of flexibility in scheduling. Work/life balance has risen in prominence in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, corrections work has been largely exempt from such debates as there is no question about the essentialness of the work or the feasibility of doing it from home. Given the well-documented research of the stress and mental health impact of correctional work,<sup>8</sup> promoting work/life balance among CO’s is critical for retention and improved quality of life.

The physical work environment includes noise level, not being able to bring one’s cell phone into work, or limited access to natural lighting. Environmental factors have been linked to increased sick leave, stress, and employee substance use.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, many of these realities cannot be changed or they require significant expense to improve.

A toxic work culture can also be a significant stressor. During interviews with Canadian correctional officers, Cassiano and Ricciardelli found that more stress came from staff including gossip, lack of communication and lack of perceived managerial support than the stress

of supervising incarcerated individuals.<sup>10</sup> Unlike most aspects of the physical work environment, a toxic work culture can be changed with solid leadership.

### Concluding remarks

In closing, our research suggests advertising to today’s new applicants is most effective when agencies use websites, social media outlets and employment events over using radio ads, billboards and television. New applicants are most attracted to competitive salaries, enhanced benefits, pay differentials and incentives for overtime. Although the survey did not ask about what background might be most suitable for a correctional work environment, previous research suggests individuals with a military, human service or background in criminal justice may be one of the keys to retention.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2: Top Three Most Cited Reasons for Leaving the DOC**

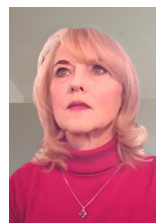
Reason Cited for Leaving	Number Reporting
Work/Life Balance Issues (Including Overtime)	16
Pay	12
Schedule (Shift/Flexibility)	11
Work Environment (Physical surroundings)	8
Retirement	7
Growth Opportunities Elsewhere	5
Work Culture	3
Safety Concerns	2
Other (Personal Reasons)	2
Benefits	1
COVID/Disease Mitigation Policies	1
Inadequate Training	1
Other (Unspecified)	1
Health Concerns	0
Mission/Vision of Department/Agency	0

Correctional agencies are advised to limit the length of time and circumstances for using mandatory overtime and rigid work schedules. Instead, agencies may wish to develop policies that promote a work/life balance, such as offering childcare services to employees who work long or extended hours. Second, agencies are encouraged to broaden officer training academy curricula toward both rehabilitation and safety/security,<sup>12</sup> along with using academy instructors who project a positive attitude. A work culture of participatory decision-making and preparing front line workers to view an officer job as a career path to promotion are essential to increasing longevity. Professional development and training opportunities that differ from new hire or annual trainings may assist in retention. It might be worth examining what is within the agency's control. For example, policy waivers and changes can be one way to increase retention. Potential policy changes may include physical fitness requirements, hairstyle and grooming policies, and adjustments to personal cellphone policies within institutions. Finally, recognition awards are a cost-effective way to change the work culture into one in which employees feel appreciated and may begin to develop loyalty and organizational commitment. While retention will likely remain a challenge for the near future, correctional agencies may wish to consider being innovative in providing better opportunities and a more positive culture.

## ENDNOTES

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