

The Correctional Work Force Faces Challenges in the 21st Century

By Melvina Sumter

The U.S. work force is becoming increasingly more diverse in terms of race and gender. In addition, a very large proportion of the work force, specifically the baby boomers, are approaching retirement. Both of these trends present significant challenges to the nation, which, according to some experts, might lead to a work force shortage.¹ In fact, by 2010, it is expected that there will be a national labor shortage of 10 million workers as the demand for employees exceeds the available applicant pool.² Similar to national labor shortages, U.S. correctional agencies are also experiencing a labor shortage, plus problems recruiting qualified candidates for correctional officer positions. Results from a 2004 study indicate that 44 percent of the 44 U.S. correctional systems and four Canadian systems that responded to a work force survey face serious difficulties in recruiting and retaining an adequate staff of qualified correctional officers. The study, conducted by Workforce Associates Inc. for the American Correctional Association, found that 82 percent of respondents (correctional administrators and human resource managers from adult and juvenile institutions) reported some difficulty in recruiting correctional officers, with nearly one-fourth stating that recruiting was “extremely difficult.”³

Consequently, the field of corrections finds itself facing unprecedented work force challenges as it enters the 21st century. Correctional agencies are competing with other criminal justice, governmental and private agencies for potential applicants. Although the number of correctional employees expanded from 300,000 to more than 750,000 (150 percent) between 1982 and 1999, the growth has not kept up with the increased demand for correctional officers, according to the study. Current nationwide projections estimate that in the next decade, the U.S. will need an additional 490,000 correctional officer to fill new positions required by the growth in the prison population and to replace correctional officers who terminate employment.⁴ Based on these trends, Carroll and Moss predict that corrections will be second to the health care profession on the list of fields that are most likely to be affected by an upcoming shortage of workers.⁵ As a result of the aforementioned factors, recruitment and selection are among the critical issues facing corrections, regardless of an agency’s size.

A 21st Century Work Force

The 2004 ACA-commissioned study, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, was initiated to help develop a work force plan to assess the correctional work force

challenges across the U.S. as well as to identify promising practices and developing strategies that correctional agencies can employ to strengthen their recruitment approaches, reduce turnover and retain qualified staff.⁶ The project design encompasses three phases:

- **Discovery Phase** — Develop a description of the current correctional work force and assess the difficulty correctional agencies are experiencing in recruiting and retaining employees;
- **Create Phase** — Identify successful recruitment and retention practices that are used by public and private organizations inside and outside of the corrections field; and
- **Implementation Phase** — Develop tools for correctional agencies to enhance their recruitment and retention practices.

This article highlights some of the major findings from the discovery phase of the work force study regarding recruitment challenges and a few of the key factors that have influenced the labor force participation rates.

Characteristics of the Correctional Work Force

The data from the ACA work force study indicate that the typical correctional employee is a white, non-Hispanic, moderately educated male who is in his mid-30s. In 2001, slightly more than three-fourths (79 percent) of correctional officers were male and more than half (65 percent) were white and non-Hispanic. In 1995, about 70 percent of all U.S. correctional officers were between 25 and 44 years old, with the majority being in their 30s. During the same time frame, nearly all correctional officers (99 percent) were high school graduates; slightly more than one-third (35 percent) had at least some college; about one in 10 had associate degrees; and approximately 10 percent, of all corrections officers held bachelor’s degrees or higher. According to the study, these data reveal that the profile of correctional officers who work in adult institutions share similar characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age and education with other security and law enforcement, governmental, and private occupations with which correctional agencies compete for potential applicants.

How Today's Labor Market Has Changed

The civilian labor force has changed dramatically in recent decades and is expected to change even more in years to come. While a number of factors are responsible for overall changes in the labor force participation rate, M. Toossi identified three significant demographic changes that have influenced labor force participation in recent times.⁷ The most dramatic of recent demographic changes is gender, with the entry of women into the work force. Since the 1970s, the expansion of women in the labor force has compensated for the declining activity rate of men, increasing the overall labor force participation rate. For example, Toossi notes that the participation rate of women in the labor force was 55.3 percent in 1986, 59.3 percent in 1996 and 59.4 percent in 2006. The changing racial makeup of the U.S. population has also influenced the labor force participation rate. Whereas white non-Hispanics accounted for nearly 80 percent of the labor force in 1986 and 75 percent in 1996, their share is expected to fall to nearly 65 percent of the labor force by 2016, according to Toossi.

Recent work force projections released by the U.S. Department of Labor indicate that only 15 percent of the new entrants into the work force will be white, non-Hispanic males; the other 85 percent will be women, ethnic minorities and immigrants.⁸ Similar trends are also observed in the correctional work force, where the number of white, non-Hispanic males decreased from 72 percent in 1992 to 65 percent in 2001, a decline that is expected to continue in the correctional work force. A third trend is the aging of the labor force, driven largely by baby boomers who are expected to retire in the near future. Moreover, between 2000 and 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the number of Americans age 25 to 44 will decrease by more than 4 million.⁹ The ACA study states that the generation that follows the baby boomers is numerically much smaller and is expected to change the work culture significantly. These newcomers to the work force change jobs often and are not likely to spend their full career in one agency, or even in one occupation. They also do not embrace the dress code or management styles accepted by the baby boomers, and unlike their parents, they do not expect work to be or consume their life.

Recruitment and Selection Challenges

Study respondents noted that inadequate pay and benefits, burdensome hours and shift work, a shortage of qualified applicants, and undesirable location of correctional facilities are factors that render recruiting difficult. They also stated that their agencies are competing with other criminal justice agencies, specifically law enforcement, the federal government and private sector agencies, that offer more attractive jobs, pay and benefit packages for well-qualified potential correctional applicants. In most instances, the correctional officer pay is not comparable to that of members of other protective service occupations. The unpredictable nature of corrections and the dangerous situations that correctional officers encounter are other recruitment barriers reported. Finally, the respondents

noted that a significant portion of the population is only exposed to the negative aspects of corrections, which is another reason why potential job applicants avoid the field of corrections as a career. Both television and movies expose and magnify accounts of corruption among a small percentage of correctional officers as well as portray images of dark, dank hallways inhabited by fierce correctional officers who abuse and exploit the inmates they supervise.¹⁰

Implications

In summary, the ever-changing dynamics of gender, race and age within the U.S. population has affected the labor force participation rate over time. As such, it is projected that within the next 20 years, women and ethnic minorities will make up more than two-thirds of a work force that will be multigenerational and culturally diverse. Based on these demographic changes, correctional agencies have major obstacles to overcome if they are going to be successful in their recruitment efforts, especially in appealing to younger people, ethnic minorities and women.

First, agencies will need to realize that they are appealing to a new generation of applicants who do not hold corrections in high esteem. The general public, including college students, tend to have more exposure to careers in law enforcement and generally view correctional officers as poorly trained and less educated than law enforcement officers. College students also are typically unaware of the various occupations associated with prison administration and operations.¹¹ Correctional agencies will need to dispel the misconceptions and negative image proliferated by the mass entertainment media about the field of corrections. Second, these agencies will need to develop strategies to compete more aggressively with other criminal justice agencies, private security companies, governmental organizations and private sector businesses that can offer more attractive jobs, salaries and benefit packages. Third, correctional agencies will need to communicate to the public how the correctional officer position has changed from that of a "guard" to a more challenging, honorable profession that requires technical skills. Major responsibilities now include report writing; conducting investigations; operating security devices and simple communications equipment such as hand-held radios and telephones; processing inmate movement; and interpreting and applying inmate rules and regulations.

Finally, while operating with limited budgets and resources, correctional agencies will need to develop and implement new and creative recruiting methods. Traditional means of recruiting — newspaper advertisements, "shopping mall" recruitment booths and the twice-a-year university or college job fairs — do not meet the current recruiting needs of correctional agencies.¹² As such, agencies should consider using online and newspaper classifieds, television and radio advertisements, roadside billboards, and advertisement placards on commercial transportation as viable methods to reach a new targeted population.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ American Correctional Association and Workforce Associates Inc. 2004. *A 21st century workforce for America's correctional profession*, part one of a three-part study commissioned by the American Correctional Association. Indianapolis: Workforce Associates Inc. (The primary contributors to the study were Richard Judy and Jane Lommel of Workforce Associates Inc. and Edward Barlow Jr., president of Creating the Future Inc.)

² Toossi, M. 2007. Labor force projections to 2016: More workers in their golden years. *Monthly Labor Review*, 130(11):33-52. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

³ ACA and Workforce Associates Inc. 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Carroll, J.B. and D.A. Moss. 2002. *State employee worker shortage: The impending crisis*. Lexington, Ky.: Council of State Governments.

⁶ ACA and Workforce Associates Inc. 2004.

⁷ Toossi, M. 2007.

⁸ Diller, J. 2006. *Cultural diversity: A primer for the human services, third edition*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

⁹ ACA and Workforce Associates Inc. 2004.

¹⁰ Baker, N. and M. Carrera. 2007. Unlocking the door to relationship-based corrections recruitment. *Corrections Today*, 69(1):36-38.

ACA and Workforce Associates Inc. 2004

¹¹ Edwards, C. 2007. Developing student interest in corrections: A role for universities and correctional organizations. *Corrections Today*, 69(1):40-42.

¹² Gravel, S. 2005. Diversity recruiting is about getting candidates on equal footing. *Canadian HR Reporter*, 18(17):19-22.

¹³ Ellis, G. and C. Skinner. 2005. Using visual technology for recruitment. *The Police Chief*, 72(1):20-25.

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