Exploring the experiences and impacts of workplace violence among provincial correctional officers in Canada

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Overview

- Research questions
- Background
- Objectives of this study
- Understanding and theorizing workplace violence
- Methods
- Results/Concluding remarks
The reality that correctional officers (COs) work in a high-risk environment has implications for how they understand and experience workplace violence. Therefore, we ask:

- **How do provincial COs experience workplace violence?**
- **How does workplace violence impact the health and safety of provincial COs?**
The goals of this study are to explore the nature and extent of violence among COs through their personal accounts of violence and to address the relationship between threats to health and safety and workplace organisation.
Background

- The workplace influences the health and safety of workers

- Prisons are known to be potentially violent spaces
  - e.g., physical assaults among prisoners and experienced by COs (hit, slapped, kicked, bit choked, hit with a weapon, riots); hit by feces, blood, vomit, urine, spit; responding to prisoner attempted/committed suicide
    - These conditions are associated with COs experiencing high rates of injury, stress, burnout and mental health issues
• Little consensus on the definition of violence

• Certain occupational groups at increased risk of workplace violence

• In the care and service sectors, workplace violence is associated with a lack of control in the work environment

• Workplace violence is shaped by the organizational structure of work, the labour process and conditions of work
## Methods

- **Existing dataset of interviews**
  - 31 interviews in Atlantic Canada

- Participant recruitment

- Voice recorded and transcribed

- Grounded theory
Corrections in Atlantic Canada

- Shaped by overcrowding, stress and are under-resourced

- Some facilities have been known for their “deplorable physical conditions”
90% of COs experienced or witnessed physical violence, and most officers experienced similar instances of violence on numerous occasions.

- **Violence**: Actions or behaviours that endangers or causes injury to a worker.
Most participants reported that violence from and among prisoners occurred daily, and was something to be expected:

“I’m pretty sure that 90% of the population doesn’t deal with the violence we deal with on a daily basis...It’s nice people can go to work and not experience violence... That doesn’t happen here.”
COs’ understandings of violence from prisoners

- Violence was, at times, unpredictable

- However, participants demonstrated that tension arose between prisoners when:
  - COs assert their authority (e.g., discipline prisoners)
  - Prisoners need to adapt to change (e.g., implementation of new policies and procedures and being moved within or out of the prison)

- COs managed the possibility of violence by engaging in a “certain level of strictness” (e.g., not strictly adhering to policy and “bending the rules”)
Health impacts

- Self-reported physical injuries
  - e.g., concussion, black eye, cuts, fractures, fat lips, soreness

- Self-reported mental health issues
  - Traumatized, depressed, anxious, and reported post-traumatic stress diagnosis

“I suffered from post-traumatic stress, went off, been of for another months and now I’ve probably been back for probably 4 years. I still suffer from post-traumatic stress and still go to therapists.”
Workplace violence is shaped by the organizational structure of work, the labour process and the conditions of work.

- Violence is normalized and seen as “part of the job”, pointing to the lack of control of COs’ work environment.
- COs engage in emotional labour to manage the potential of violence.
- Prison conditions (e.g., overcrowding and understaffing) intensifies the potential of violence, makes it difficult to stay safe and can result in poor OHS outcomes (e.g., negative health outcomes).
Questions?

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