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**Fallout: the Stress of   
“Working Short” in Corrections**

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It is clear to anyone working in corrections that we are [working understaffed](https://www.corrections1.com/understaffing/). In my travels as an in-service trainer, I hear it over and over from jail staff. I am proud of these dedicated people who work inside our jails. Whether scheduled and or unexpectedly called in, they go to work inside a building where the residents (inmates) constantly try to undermine them. As a rule, correctional officers are not widely respected or liked. Many citizens know little or nothing of what they go through and the dangers they face, *on every shift.*

When I started in law enforcement, people told me I had job security because law enforcement, including corrections, works 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We never close—and there always be a need for police officers, correctional officers, [probation and parole officers](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/probation-officer-health-wellness/), and juvenile detention staff. Also, many of us in our younger days were taught by our parents to respect those who wore the badge—they work to keep us safe.

Times have changed in this fast-paced world. Corrections is short-staffed for many reasons. It is a dangerous situation. Law enforcement agencies need good people to deal with crime and apprehend those who commit it. Corrections, including institutions, non-institutional agencies and juvenile facilities, needs good people to supervise those who are serving time, and to monitor and assist those released under supervision. If this short staffing situation continues, the public is at risk.

Dealing with staff shortages in corrections requires understanding the reasons for and the impact of short staffing. It will also require leaders willing to think creatively to reduce inmate populations, improve personnel recruitment, and support correctional staff and their families.

**Reasons for Staff Shortages in Corrections**

Staffing shortages are the result of national and local trends, and not every facility faces the same challenges. But the following three factors contribute to many of the staffing shortages facing correctional facilities across the country.

*#1: Anti-Corrections Sentiment*

News events are flashpoints contributing to anti-law enforcement sentiment. Most notably, the arrest and death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 resulted in demonstrations, riots and a “defund police” movement that is still around today. In addition, some are calling for the defunding of jails and prisons. In 2020, in a New Jersey county, incumbent politicians proposed stopping the construction of a previously approved $65 million jail. The proposed replacement? A community center. Opponents to the about-face on the jail project stated the new jail enhances public safety and improves the working conditions of correctional officers who were working inside an obsolete jail.[1]

Ironically, some of the goals of police reform create greater demands for correctional funding. The relaxation of bail laws placed many serious offenders on the street, which in turn has created public calls for more strict incarceration—both pre-trial and post-conviction. But more cell space costs taxpayer money. Reform advocates also desire more humane conditions in jails. But meeting constitutional requirements of inmate safety, medical care and mental health care also costs money. Defunding corrections will hurt this approach.

While the defunding issue is debated in the halls of government and in the media, some correctional workers may feel abandoned. They may think that the leaders in our nation have no clear idea of what corrections is or the challenges correctional staff face every day.

*#2: COVID-19*

COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on corrections. In 2021, 4320 officers died from COVID-19; so far in 2022, 50 officers have succumbed to the virus.[2] In an already dangerous profession, this disease makes the environment more deadly. The pandemic has also resulted in many officers retiring and resigning. One Texas veteran correctional officer wanted to stay on the job until he reached 50 but resigned after seeing coworkers and friends die of the virus. Brian Dawe, the national director of One Voice United, a non-profit organization that supports correctional officers, said that with “understaffing, poor pay, poor benefits, horrendous working conditions … officers and their families have had enough.”[3]

Deaths and retirements not only create immediate staffing strain; they also affect recruiting. Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the University of Michigan, states that, “When jobs become riskier, it becomes harder to attract workers … By failing to protect prisoners from COVID, the criminal justice system not only created an unfair risk of severe illness and death for the incarcerated, but the increased COVID risk to employees has undoubtedly contributed to staff shortages.”[3] When a college graduate, a high school graduate or a military veteran—all bent on public service—reads about COVID spreading inside overcrowded correctional facilities, they may think twice about a corrections career.

According to some federal and state corrections officers’ unions, including California and Massachusetts, COVID vaccine mandates also have an impact, driving out unvaccinated personnel and making understaffing worse.[3]

*#3: Lack of Recruitment*

In addition to prisons, local jails are feeling the brunt of short staffing. Sheriff Brett Mason, sheriff of Le Sueur County in Minnesota, stated in March 2022 that jail staffing in his state’s six sheriffs’ jurisdictions is a serious problem. Blue Earth County (MN) Sheriff Brad Peterson says, “It’s a huge problem across the country. No one wants to be a correctional officer anymore. … We would have 93 or 99 applications for a [jail] deputy, then a couple of years ago it was 57, then 33 and now we had 15 applicants for a deputy position.”[4]

Another problem is a sharp drop-off in college law enforcement enrollments. Most likely this is the result of the criticism of the law enforcement field—corrections and police work. Traditionally, college students majoring in criminal justice went into corrections after graduation.[4] Without that pipeline of students, the applicant pool dries up.

**Impact of Staff Shortages in Corrections**

The effects of staff shortages reverberate throughout correctional facilities, but two key impacts involve safety and stress.

*Safety*

The safety of inmates, offenders and staff are directly related. The fewer staff you have, the less safe everyone is. In 2021, some facilities in Georgia reported a 70% vacancy rate; in Nebraska, overtime hours quadrupled since 2010. Florida temporarily closed three facilities as officer vacancy rates there almost doubled.[3] At some federal institutions, correctional officers are [protesting in picket lines](https://www.corrections1.com/coronavirus-covid-19/articles/federal-prison-workers-to-protest-staff-shortages-vaccine-mandate-m0Pt2mR13wImwxPU/) and civilians such as teachers and dentists are called in to staff security shifts. This is dangerous—maintaining security requires specialized training.[3]

With fewer staff, those who remain are required to work longer hours. This leads to frustrations as staff and inmates feel the pressure. In many facilities activities such as recreation and educational programs are restricted or temporarily put on hold. Activities for inmates are healthy and relieve tension. Without them, inmates feel “cooped up” and may be more likely to act out, increasing the [danger to staff and other inmates](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/be-aware-be-smart-be-safe-correctional-officer-safety/). Also, inmates see the news, and they too worry about COVID-19. Their families worry as well.

Imagine reporting for your shift in a jail, prion or juvenile detention center and finding out that a third of your colleagues are absent due to COVID, or some have resigned or retired. You thought you were going to supervise a unit of 50 inmates, now you must maintain custody of 100 or more. Inmates know when shifts are short and [take advantage of the situation](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/how-inmates-manipulate-correctional-officers/) by constructing or trafficking in contraband and committing assaults (including sexual assaults) on other inmates and staff. Fewer staff on duty means fewer officers available for backup and relief. Officers become tired and inmates, through their manipulative charm, wear down correctional officers with requests and questions.

*Stress*

Correctional staff are [stressed out](https://info.lexipol.com/webinar-correctional-officer-stress). The pressure of covering posts and the constant feeling of anxiety when having more area and duties to work takes a toll. Personnel become fatigued and dread the supervisor coming onto their posts trying to recruit extra hands for the upcoming short shift. On their days off, supervisors call them in for overtime. The term [*burnout*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/causes-of-burnout-in-corrections/) rears its head.

Burnout is defined as a [set of symptoms](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/symptoms-and-effects-of-burnout-in-corrections/), such as cynicism, anger, complacency and boredom, caused by not managing chronic stress. Burnout can lead once-dedicated correctional officers to perform their duties in a callous, counterproductive way. They may stop caring about safety, the security of the facility, the rehabilitation of the inmates and their welfare. Studies have shown that over 70% of correctional officers said that short staffing contributes to high levels of stress.[5] Let’s not forget the probation and parole field. Fewer staff means higher caseloads and fewer people to answer court inquiries, write [presentence investigation reports](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/writing-probation-reports-3-roles-probation-officers-play-and-how-they-impact-reports/), act on violators and conduct field visits.

Behind everyone who works in corrections are good people: spouses, partners, colleagues, families and friends. They worry when the correctional officer or probation officer walks out the door to go to work; there is no guarantee that they will safely return home. And if that workplace is short staffed, they worry more. They also take the brunt of anger, burnout and feelings of exhaustion from a stressed-out correctional worker. Now they must deal with wondering if their loved one is bringing home COVID contracted from inmates. This is especially sensitive if the family includes small children, a family member with a chronic medical problem or a sick or elderly relative.

**What Corrections Must Do**

We may not be able to resolve all the root causes of staff shortages in corrections, but there are steps that can help alleviate the problem.

The first step is to reduce the inmate population. Overcrowded facilities cause stress on the staff. When a correctional officer must supervise a high number of inmates, they may ask themselves, “Why am I here? Do I really want to do this?” High probation and parole caseloads lead to some probation officers—who are good at their jobs, are conscientious and professional—to walk away.

Many correctional agency heads are working to reduce inmate populations, not just because of COVID, but because high offender populations put great strains on the infrastructure and staff. In North Carolina, Mecklenburg County Sheriff Garry McFadden publicly called on the judiciary, prosecutors, public defenders, the North Carolina Sheriff’s Association, and the United States Marshals to work together to reduce inmate populations.[6] More leaders will need to be this direct with their elected officials and community stakeholders. Jail diversion programs for minor offenses, as well as those with substance use disorder or mental illness, must be staffed, funded and their value communicated to the public.

The second step is effective recruiting. This is not easy. Agencies will have to fund decent wages and benefits for applicants. Corrections professionals should be talking to college criminal justice classes and veterans coming out of the military. Recruiting means also being innovative, with attention-getting online advertisements, videos, etc. Public relations are important—we must overcome the portrayal of corrections officers as “thugs” or untrained, and corrupt. Corrections is a noble profession. At every opportunity, we must convey the training involved, the professionalism of our people and the essential role in public safety we play.

The final step is to [support the staff and their families](https://www.lexipol.com/solutions/wellness-resources/) as they deal with fatigue and stress. This must be a team effort, from the top brass all the way down the line. Supervisors must do their best to grant leave, minimize mandatory overtime, encourage staff to seek help in stress management programs, follow COVID protocols and speak to the families of staff about their concerns. All these approaches can help to retain staff. Even small steps like saying “thank you,” being available, not watching the clock, and helping to relieve officers on post says a lot. These “little things” may result in staff staying with the job. Finally, ask staff for suggestions and how they are doing. The good people in corrections really do not want to leave. They will appreciate the opportunity to be heard.

More than anything, addressing staff shortages in corrections requires bold, empathetic leaders. Correctional staff face danger in performing an often-thankless task. We owe it to them to be as courageous as they are in fighting for better working conditions.

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Description automatically generated with medium confidenceLt. Gary F. Cornelius retired in 2005 from the Fairfax County (VA) Office of the Sheriff after serving over 27 years in the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center. His jail career included assignments in confinement, work release, programs, planning/ policy and classification. Gary is an independent freelance correctional author and trainer. He has taught corrections courses for George Mason University since 1986, teaches corrections in-service sessions throughout Virginia, and has performed training and consulting for the American Correctional Association, the American Jail Association and the National Institute of Justice. Gary is the author of several books, including *The Correctional Officer: A Practical Guide, The American Jail: Cornerstone of Modern Corrections, The Art of the Con: Avoiding Offender Manipulation*, and *Stressed Out: Strategies for Living and Working in Corrections*.