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**IDEnTIFYING AND MANAGING The Rogue CorrectionS Officer**

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Corrections is a challenging occupation. In the past few years, correctional officers and leaders have dealt with overcrowding, mentally ill inmates, special populations, gangs, escape, inmate manipulation and short staffing. We see demonstrations demanding we be defunded by people who know little about what we do and the duties we must perform.

These issues can take their toll on staff competency, effectiveness and morale. As a correctional employee (sworn or civilian), you take pride in your work and believe in the mission of your agency. How do you feel when you check the news and see headlines such as:

* *Correctional officers accused of excessive force*
* *Jail deputies fired for contraband smuggling*
* *Investigation reveals prison officers had sex with inmates*

Nearly all the personnel who work inside our prisons, jails, juvenile centers and community corrections facilities are professional, dedicated and believe in the public safety mission of their agencies. However, headlines like these attract the attention of the public, who wonder what is going on inside these facilities—facilities paid for by taxpayers.

There are “bad apples” in all occupations, and corrections is no different. We call them rogue corrections officers, and it’s essential we be able to identify them, understand what causes their behavior, and manage them effectively to reduce and hopefully eliminate the harm they can bring on themselves, inmates and the facility.

**Identifying the Rogue Corrections Officer**

The rogue officer is the loose cannon on the deck. While we can’t always predict how and when they will cause damage, we can learn to identify [behavioral signs](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/warning-signs-a-corrections-officer-may-be-compromised/) that may indicate an officer has gone rogue.

There are different degrees of rogue behavior. The most serious includes engaging in excessive force, harassing inmates, smuggling contraband, taking bribes and aiding in inmate escapes. Examples include the [Baltimore City Detention Center scandal](https://nation.time.com/2013/04/24/sex-with-guards-in-baltimore-prison-scandal/) in 2013 and the [2015 escape](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/nyregion/dannemora-prison-escape-that-riveted-the-nation-5-things-we-learned-from-an-inquiry-into-how-it-happened.html) of two inmates doing life from the Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York. In both cases, rogue staff aided the inmates. Another example includes a District of Columbia jail officer [arrested by the FBI for smuggling](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/dc-prison-guard-arrested-on-bribery-charges/2014/04/22/b0a3404a-ca5d-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html) a cellphone, cigarettes and other contraband to an inmate.

Excessive force is probably the clearest trait of rogue behavior. For example, an inmate in a Mississippi jail was beaten to death by several jail deputies in 2006.[1] He was arrested for simple assault and disturbing the peace. During booking, he stepped away from the wall. What followed next could be described as torture. Video recording showed no aggression by the inmate, yet officers repeatedly punched and kicked the detainee in the chest, head and back. They used a TASER device several times in his back. While handcuffed and hog tied, the detainee was dropped headfirst on the concrete floor, blood dripping from his mouth. A spit mask was applied to his face, and a sergeant sprayed pepper spray through the mask. The sergeant then wrapped a sheet around the detainee’s head, cinched it tight and poured water over it in a crude waterboarding procedure.

The victim died two days later in a local hospital, after being declared brain dead and having life support removed. His family received a payment of $3.5 million. The sergeant—the apparent ringleader of the rogue deputies—received two life sentences; nine other deputies received terms of incarceration ranging from four months’ house arrest to four years in prison. While this incident shocks the conscience, there were numerous other incidents of lesser degree at the facility that hinted at extensive rogue officer behavior. Hundreds of inmates had complained of mistreatment. The investigation after this incident revealed multiple incidences of violating civil rights, falsifying reports and assaulting inmates—behavior that dated back years before this incident.

Other rogue behavior may not seem as serious—but it is. Whenever a corrections officer ignores inmate complaints, medical conditions or concerns, the safety and security of the facility and *all* who live and work inside is compromised. In 2015, an Oregon family received $5 million in the case of an inmate who, after being beaten by two other inmates, suffered kidney lacerations, severe internal bleeding, a skull contusion, a brain injury and a fracture to his clavicle.[2] For five hours, the inmate used the cell intercom to try to get staff to help him. But these calls for help, as well as numerous other signs of the inmate’s distress, were ignored. The medical technician left after he could not get a blood pressure. After the inmate urinated blood, the sergeant on duty said he thought the red water in the cell’s toilet was fruit juice or something from the jail canteen. A deputy said it was a common practice to shut off the intercom if an inmate was judged to be “too needy.” The inmate died of his injuries. Investigators concluded that jail staff relied too much on video checks instead of personal checks.

Other behavioral clues of a rogue corrections officer include not taking training seriously, complaining about the job and alienating other staff. These behaviors can lead to the officer being susceptible to [inmate manipulation](https://info.lexipol.com/tip-sheet-inmate-manipulation), which further chips away at their ethical code.

Rogue officers also make mistakes in social media. They may post opinions criticizing their agencies or take shots at minority groups. Or they may use social media as a tool. In one 2019 case, a jail officer was charged with burglarizing or attempting to burglarize the homes of citizens who were attending funerals. The accusations listed at least six incidents. When caught, she said she was trying to complete market transactions on Facebook or was hired to perform cleaning services through Facebook and did not think anyone was supposed to be home.[3]

**Causes of Rogue Corrections Officer Behavior**

There are many reasons why a corrections officer may forget professionalism, training, the ethics he or she learned in the academy, and the advice of training officers, mentors and supervisors. Some may not handle the [stress of the job](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/fallout-the-stress-of-working-short-in-corrections/) well and overcompensate their anxiety by acting tough, harassing inmates or getting too physical in controlling them. They may look up to heavy-handed, abrasive, rough officers and think that is the best way to handle offenders.

Rogue officers may also subscribe to common myths about law enforcement, including:[5]

* Street justice teaches offenders a lesson: You want control, kick their ass.
* The courts don’t punish—so we must.
* We deal with bad people, so we get a lot of complaints.
* You want respect: Swearing and cursing are OK.
* Racial slurs are OK—just be careful where and around who you say them.
* Be tough—that is the answer.
* Once you are in the “brotherhood,” you cannot get out. Always back fellow officers.
* Be a tough SOB: You will get promoted; that is leadership.
* You must be macho—tough and strong—to be a good corrections officer.
* Offenders only respect the officers they fear.

These start the corrections officer down a slippery slope of poor ethics, condescension, disrespect of the job and forgetting their training. Bad habits form—roughing inmates up, not wanting to be bothered with inmate concerns, and thinking their way is the only way. These beliefs tear down the agency. Corrections professionals who notice these negative behaviors should speak up—to the officer and tosupervisors, if necessary.

**Preventing Corrections Officers from Going Rogue**

There is no magic formula to prevent corrections officers from going rogue, but there are some commonsense measures you can take, both at the line and supervisory levels.

Facilities that invest resources into building and developing a professional staff insulate themselves against rogue behavior. Bad behavior will not be tolerated by good staff people. I’ve identified three “stairways” to a professional staff:[5]

1. *Hire the right people for the job*. Corrections is short staffed, but that does not mean we have to fill the ranks with people unfit for the job. Be realistic in your description of the job. Corrections officers deal with dangerous people who work to subvert doing time, are assaultive, have mental health challenges, and so on. Also important in hiring is making clear that corrections is a people profession--the corrections officer is responsible for the welfare, care, safety and well-being of all offenders in custody.
2. *Use the field training period to identify potential problems*. [Field training officers](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/confessions-of-a-field-training-officer-part-1/) (FTOs) should be highly qualified staff with good work records and maturity. They should not be given the job simply because they have been there a long time and everyone likes them. Pick your best people. In addition to FTOs, identify mentors—the mature, professional ethical officers—to work with trainees. FTO, mentors and agency supervisors must maintain good contact with each other and be on the lookout for trainees with egos, such as being on a power trip, being the class clown or not taking the training seriously. The [probationary year](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/evaluating-the-probationary-employee/) gives the agency broad latitude as to whether to keep the trainee. Supervisors who see runaway ego problems should have a frank, clear discussion about rogue behavior, including how corrections officers can get fired or incur lawsuits. Get their attention early on.
3. *Ensure all officers receive and internalize frequent training on* [*ethical issues*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/doing-the-right-thing-the-importance-of-ethics-in-corrections/)*.* Training topics should include excessive force, inmates’ rights, interpersonal communications, special populations, stress management and resisting manipulation, among others. Training should be interesting, up to date and command the attention of the officers. Some officers with negative attitudes “know it all” and just attend to get their hours in. Instructors must find ways to get these officers involved.

**Correcting Rogue Officer Behavior**

Supervisors in corrections play a critical role in reducing the chance a corrections officer will go rogue. Rogue officers are like a type of cancer, spreading negativity throughout the staff. Therefore, it’s essential that supervisors put a stop to rogue behavior as soon as it’s observed. Taking a “wait and see” approach or assuming the officer will improve on their own sends the message that the behavior is acceptable. Some rogue officers can be turned around if you act early.[6] Consider the following strategies:

* *Document bad behavior and what steps were taken to deal with the problems.* Written warnings can jolt the officer into realizing they need to stop the rogue behavior. Documentation is also essential to protect you and the facility against liability. For example, staff told you Officer Jones is heavy-handed with inmates and talks down to them constantly. He likes to trigger anger in inmates. If you do nothing, and one day Officer Jones is accused by Internal Affairs of breaking an inmate’s jaw unnecessarily—where will *you* be?
* *Use progressive* [*discipline*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/taking-the-pain-out-of-disciplining-public-safety-employees/)*.* Put rogue corrections officers on notice that their behavior is not acceptable. Play the termination card: Let them clearly know they can be fired and criminally charged; the agency will not defend them if they deliberately engage in negative acts, such as ignoring medical needs, use of force, sexual misconduct. Progressive discipline can include remedial training, demotion, suspension or counseling. If the officer refuses advice—such as writing “refused” on a letter or memo—take it to your supervisors for further action.
* *Make* [*performance evaluations*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/making-public-safety-performance-evaluations-work/) *count.* The performance evaluation is one of the best tools that a supervisor has. Document through the evaluation year any negative acts, counseling sessions, remedial actions and training. Be clear on evaluations what the corrections officer has done wrong or is doing wrong, and what can be done to correct such behavior.

Rogue corrections officers can cause serious harm to inmates, other staff and the facility. Fortunately, supervisors and all staff members can send a strong message that rogue behavior won’t be tolerated. We all have a responsibility to speak up, demand ethical behavior and model the highest level of safety and professionalism.

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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*.