

TO STAY OR QUIT: A Review of the Literature on Correctional Staff Turnover†

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ABSTRACT: *Correctional staff are the most important asset for any correctional agency. In fact, they are the heart and soul of any correctional organization. Many staff, however, voluntarily quit. The cost of this turnover is high for correctional organizations. Nonetheless, correctional staff turnover has generated only limited research. Moreover, there has been little direction in the correctional turnover research. The different forms of turnover are discussed and the correctional staff turnover research is reviewed. A causal model for correctional staff voluntary turnover is developed and presented to guide future research.*

INTRODUCTION

Turnover, the severing of employment ties with an organization, appears to be a significant problem in the field of corrections. A recent national survey of wardens indicated that correctional officer departure was a concern (McShane & Williams, 1993). Both Hepburn (1989) and Philliber (1987) advised that annual turnover rates for correctional officers hover around the 25% mark. These separation rates ranged from 1% to 45%, depending upon which state is being examined (McShane, Williams, Schichor, & McClain, 1991). Wright (1994) likewise reported that correctional staff turnover averaged about 16%, with a nationwide high of 40%. The average annual turnover among correctional officers is clearly in the double digits and probably lies somewhere between 12% and 25% (Wees, 1996).

The level of turnover is an important indicator of the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization (Park, Ofari-Dankwa, & Bishop, 1994). Turnover is disruptive and costly as it wastes human and monetary resources (Casco, 1991; Roseman, 1981). It is especially costly for

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correctional organizations since they rely so heavily on the human factor (Stohr, Self, & Lovrich, 1992). Estimates are that up to \$20,000 is spent recruiting, testing, hiring, and training each new correctional staff member (Gilbert, 1988; McShane et al., 1991). Obviously, a reduction in employee loss would save substantial money. Moreover, it is usually the most competent workers who quit because it is relatively easy for them to obtain work elsewhere (Likert, 1967; Locke, 1976). This pattern surfaces in the private industry (Dreher, 1982; Wright, 1991), as well as in correctional facilities (Wright, 1993).

Staff turnover also disrupts the social networks, contacts, and communication lines that have become established over time (Mitchell, MacKenzie, Styve, & Gover, 2000). Correctional administrators rely on staff to obtain information, directly and indirectly, about what is "happening" in the facility so as to avoid critical incidents. It takes time for new workers to learn these subtle, but very necessary, skills (Stohr et al., 1992). Employee attrition also affects morale (Byrd, Cochran, Silverman, & Blount, 2000; Stohr et al., 1992). High turnover can become a public image nightmare as it conveys a negative impression of work conditions. A latent effect is that excessive turnover can lead to a large proportion of relatively new staff. These novices typically have less training and experience which can translate into an insufficient and overworked staff. Ultimately, this situation can reduce the quality of services provided to inmates. Disturbances, riots, escapes, and the loss of professional accreditation for the facility hang in the balance. Last, but not least, are the economic, social, and psychological costs to the individuals who elect to depart.

Reducing staff turnover in an era of tightening budgets and expanding expectations should be a top priority for correctional administrators. Unfortunately, the research to date on this topic is quite limited. This situation is probably due, in part, to a lack of concrete direction. Theories or models with which to explain correctional staff turnover remain undeveloped. As a result, the purpose of this paper, is to review the existing correctional staff turnover literature and propose a causal model that researchers can test.

DEFINING TURNOVER

Turnover refers to the cessation of employment ties. There are three main types of worker turnover: quits, layoffs, and discharges. One can categorize these three types of employee turnover further as voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary turnover occurs when the employee initiates termination of the employee-organization relationship (Bluedorn, 1978). Quits, also referred to as resignations or exits, fall

under the category of voluntary turnover (Hirschman, 1970). Layoffs, discharges, and mandatory retirements represent involuntary separations (Price, 1977; Price & Mueller, 1981, 1986). Unlike voluntary turnover, involuntary turnover is not initiated by the individual. Usually, the employing organization initiates involuntary turnover (Mueller, Boyer, Price, & Iverson, 1994), although departures due to death or poor health also fit here (McElroy, Morrow, & Fenton, 1995).

Voluntary turnover is usually more avoidable, costly, and disruptive to an organization (Price, 1977). Involuntary turnover, on the other hand, is less controllable. In many cases, it is not in the best interest of the organization or the worker to continue employment (McShane & Williams, 1993; Stohr et al., 1992).

Voluntary turnover is the most frequently studied form of employee separation (Price & Mueller, 1981). Price (1977) identifies three reasons for this focus. First, voluntary turnover accounts for the majority of turnover. Second, a single theory is unlikely to address the various antecedents of both voluntary and involuntary turnover. Voluntary turnover is a more homogeneous phenomenon, simplifying theory formation. Third, management can control voluntary turnover more easily. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on voluntary turnover.

CORRELATES OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF TURNOVER AND TURNOVER INTENT

There is a limited body of empirical research concerning the correlates of turnover among correctional staff, particularly correctional officers. One can group these antecedent variables into the general areas of personal characteristics, work environment, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Personal Characteristics

Researchers have looked at the effects of race, age, tenure, gender, and education on correctional staff turnover. Several studies report that black correctional officers have higher turnover rates than do white officers (Ford, 1995; Jacobs & Grear, 1977; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Mitchell et al., 2000). While education does not appear to exert a direct effect (Camp, 1994; Ford, 1995; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Robinson, Porporino, & Simourd, 1997), the results are mixed in terms of age. Some studies find an inverse relationship (Camp, 1994; Robinson et al., 1997), while others do not (Ford, 1995; Jurik & Winn, 1987). Two studies report an inverse association between tenure and correctional turnover (Camp, 1994; Robinson et al., 1997), while one analysis finds no such relationship (Jurik & Winn, 1987). Finally, there does not appear to be a signifi-

ificant relationship between gender and correctional turnover (Ford, 1995; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Mitchell et al., 2000; Robinson et al., 1997), with one exception (Camp, 1994).

Work Environment

Some investigators have explored work environment factors as possible antecedents of correctional staff turnover. Studies have linked supervision, autonomy, communication, support, authority, and input into decision making with correctional turnover and turnover intent (Jurik & Winn, 1987; McCann, n.d.; Mitchell et al., 2000; Slate & Vogel, 1997). Conversely, neither job stress, pay, nor benefits seem to have a significant direct effect on correctional staff turnover (Camp, 1994; McCann, n.d.; Robinson et al., 1997).

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Except for one study (Camp, 1994), job satisfaction generates a negative impact on both turnover intent (Byrd et al., 2000; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Mitchell et al., 2000) and turnover itself (Dennis, 1998; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Robinson et al., 1997; Wright, 1993). Similarly, organizational commitment has a significant negative effect on turnover intent (Kane, Saylor, & Nacci, n.d.; Robinson, Porporino, Simourd, 1992) and turnover (Camp, 1994; Robinson et al., 1997; Stohr et al., 1992). However, there is limited and conflicting evidence regarding the relationship between turnover intent and actual departures. Jurik and Winn (1987) found willingness to change jobs among correctional officers in a Western prison had a positive effect on actual turnover. Conversely, no significant relationship emerged between turnover intent and turnover among federal correctional staff (Camp, 1994).

Summary

In addition to the substantive relationships already enumerated, one can draw three other conclusions from this brief literature review. First, there is little research on correctional staff turnover, even though this phenomenon is a costly and disruptive event. Second, there is little consistency in how turnover is measured. Some studies include both voluntary and involuntary turnover, while other investigations only measure voluntary turnover. Third, the literature offers very little guidance and concrete direction for future inquiry.

THE NEED FOR A CAUSAL MODELING APPROACH

Future researchers should approach the study of correctional staff voluntary turnover in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. Without this structure, turnover research would be ad hoc and generate very little, if any, useful information (Lee & Mowday, 1987). Researchers who focus on an overly narrow set of variables may miss some very basic implications. In addition, although many correctional managers feel they have a good grasp on why employees quit, this knowledge is rarely based on a thorough understanding of the problem (Lee & Mowday, 1987). A more comprehensive and inclusive research model might help managers design grounded interventions aimed at reducing voluntary employee turnover.

It is also extremely important to investigate causal processes rather than focus on a series of individual variables. Much of the correctional staff turnover literature relies on correlations or other bivariate analyses. A handful have utilized multivariate techniques, such as regression, to examine the impact of a group of independent variables on turnover. Unfortunately, the present author could not locate any published studies utilizing path analysis or structural models which examine correctional staff turnover.

Another vital consideration is the inclusion of both direct and indirect effects. If researchers ignore indirect effects, there is a distinct possibility they will underestimate the actual impact a variable exerts (Bollen, 1989). In other words, the failure to entertain indirect effects could force an unwarranted rejection of an important variable within the causal process. Unfortunately, the literature to date on the topic of correctional staff turnover has avoided such an intricate analysis. Whether this shortcoming compromises the accumulated body of knowledge remains an open empirical question.

A Proposed Causal Model

The six general areas postulated to influence the causal process of correctional employee voluntary turnover include turnover intent, alternative employment opportunities, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work environment forces, and employee characteristics. The proposed causal model appears in Figure 1. Each of these components is discussed in greater detail.

Turnover Intent

The intention to perform a behavior is the best predictor of that behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Turnover intent is defined as a

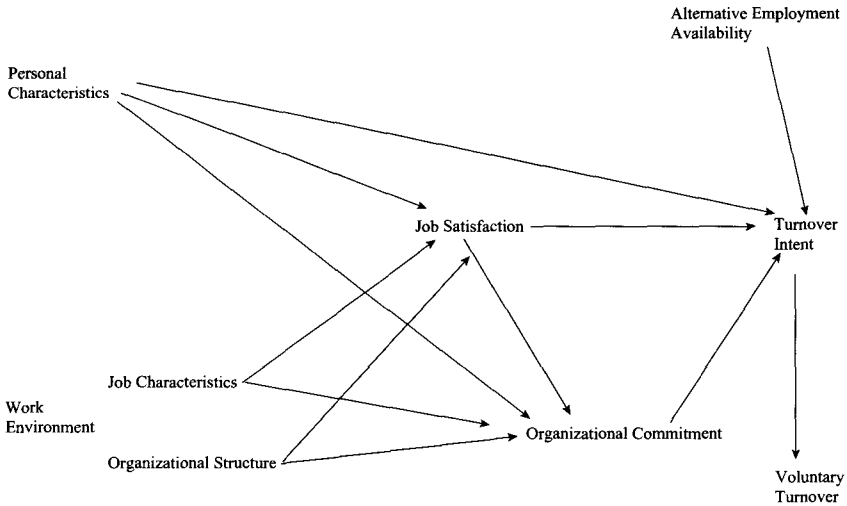


FIGURE 1
Causal model for correctional staff turnover

worker's desire to remain or relinquish organizational employment ties within a given time frame (Price & Mueller, 1981). Turnover intent is generally measured by a single item asking if the employee plans to quit employment during a specific time period, usually six months to a year. Several single-item measures are readily available (Camp, 1994; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2001; Mueller et al. 1994).

As Figure 1 depicts, turnover intent should have a positive effect on voluntary turnover among correctional staff and will be the most immediate variable prior to job separation. Furthermore, turnover intent is the mediating variable for the all the other areas in the model.

Availability of Alternative Employment Opportunities

Availability of alternative employment opportunities should have a direct and positive impact on correctional staff turnover intent. Many economic theories assume that people are rational when making major decisions, including quitting a job. Therefore, it is argued that most correctional workers will not leave their current positions without a reasonable probability of finding other suitable employment.

Some studies have used the local unemployment rate as a measure of alternative employment opportunities (e.g., Camp, 1994). However, these indicators may not be solid operationalizations because they do not reflect the individual's perception of available alternatives. Many

correctional workers are probably unaware of the actual unemployment rate. In addition, the unemployment rate is not necessarily an adequate reflection for all sectors. As a result, it is recommended that investigators adopt a perceptually-based measure (Quinn & Staines, 1979).

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are the next two variables presumed to shape the turnover process. Indeed, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are probably the two most important concepts in understanding employee behaviors, including voluntary turnover. Locke (1976, p. 1300) defines job satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences." Spector (1996, p. 214) likewise contends job satisfaction is simply "the extent to which people like their jobs." Basically, job satisfaction refers to the affective response a person has towards his or her job. It is recommended that researchers utilize a global, rather than a facet, measure of job satisfaction (Lambert, Barton, & Hogan, 1999). Investigators can incorporate existing global measures of job satisfaction easily into correctional staff turnover research (e.g., Camp, 1994; Curry, Wakefield, Price, & Mueller, 1986; Mueller et al., 1994).

While organizational commitment is much more difficult to define (Lambert et al., 1999), it represents the bond between the worker and the employing organization. Basically, organizational commitment is the strength of an employee's feelings towards the institutional objectives (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Steers, 1977). While some measurement issues do surface here (Lambert et al., 1999), there are a number of indices that researchers can use to study the link between organizational commitment and voluntary correctional staff turnover (e.g., Camp, 1994; Mowday et al., 1982).

Job satisfaction should have a direct impact on turnover intention. According to Terkel (1974, p. xi), work provides "daily meaning as well as daily bread." However, it is not just financial rewards that are important to people. One survey of U.S. workers reports that pay, benefits, and job security were not among the top ten items workers wanted in a job (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985, p. 86). Instead, the most common responses involved rewarding, enjoyable, and enriching jobs. In other words, many workers, including correctional employees, seek job satisfaction.

According to Locke (1976), the reaction to something that is satisfying is to embrace it, while the response to something that is dissatisfying is to withdraw from it. In addition, highly dissatisfied employees will be more likely to voice intentions to leave so as to alleviate their

negative feelings (Roseman, 1981). According to Baron (1985), individuals who consistently experience unpleasant or dissatisfying environments or situations develop a state of dissonance, and most people attempt to reduce or eliminate dissonance. On the other hand, workers who are happy with their jobs have far less reason to leave. Therefore, it is argued that dissatisfied correctional workers will be far more likely to develop desires and intentions to quit their jobs.

It is expected that organizational commitment will impact turnover intent negatively. By definition, members with low commitment will be less inclined to remain on the job. Workers with higher commitment will have stronger bonds and will want to remain affiliated with their employer. Similarly, job satisfaction is an antecedent of organizational commitment (Lambert et al., 1999). Job satisfaction occurs relatively quickly, while organizational commitment takes time to develop. Satisfied employees are more likely to view the organization in a positive light and, as such, will have a stronger bond to the organization. Therefore, it is predicted that job satisfaction will directly and significantly impact organizational commitment among correctional staff. While job satisfaction will have a direct effect, most of the total effects of job satisfaction on correctional staff turnover will be through organizational commitment.

Work Environment

The work environment indirectly affects voluntary turnover among correctional staff through job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Work environment is very important in shaping the levels of job satisfaction and worker commitment. Work environment is the encompassing atmosphere in which the employee carries out his or her job. It is comprised of much more than just physical elements (Mullins, 1989). The work environment consists of factors or characteristics that comprise the overall work conditions and situation for employees (Dawson, 1986). While there are different dimensions of the work environment (Cook, Hepworth, Wall, & Warr, 1981), one can divide it into two general categories: organizational structure and job characteristics.

Organizational structure refers to how an organization manages and operates itself (Miller & Droge, 1986; Oldham & Hackman, 1981). While organizational structure is comprised of numerous factors, the major forms of structure are centralization, instrumental communication, integration, control complexity, organizational recognition, procedural justice, distributive justice, compensation for work, perceived fairness in promotional opportunities, and formalization (Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990; Mueller et al., 1994). Organizational structure gener-

ally permeates throughout the entire work environment. Therefore, organizational structure factors generally impact all or most employees in the organization.

The second component of work environment is job characteristics. These factors relate directly to the work a particular individual does (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Examples of job characteristics are job variety, skill variety, job stress, role conflict, role clarity, role ambiguity, task significance, task identity, and knowledge and skills (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Warr, Cook, & Wall, 1979). Unlike organizational structure factors, not all employees experience the same type or magnitude of job characteristics. People have different jobs within the same organization.

A poor, negative work environment will cause correctional employees to have lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Furthermore, it is expected that organizational structure will have a greater impact on organizational commitment than on job satisfaction. Structure reflects the overall organization, while commitment measures the person's bond to the overall organization. Conversely, job characteristics should have a larger effect on job satisfaction than on organizational commitment. The number of aspects included in the term "work environment" are too numerous to discuss here. Nevertheless, there are many measures of job characteristics and organizational structure in the literature which one can adopt to study the causal process of correctional worker turnover (e.g., Camp, 1994; Cook et al., 1981; Curry et al., 1986; Mueller et al., 1994; Price & Mueller, 1986; Quinn & Staines, 1979; Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis, & Cammann, 1983).

Personal Characteristics

The last area theorized to influence the turnover process is personal characteristics. According to Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983), personal characteristics include a person's background (e.g., education, place, type of up-bringing), demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, race), and current life situation (e.g., married, number of children, religion, tenure). Personal characteristics influence how a person sees and reacts to his or her environment. Specifically, education, tenure, age, race, and gender should impact correctional employee voluntary turnover via turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Education level is expected to have a direct, inverse impact on correctional staff job satisfaction. The negative relationship is based upon the premise that better educated employees have greater job expectations. This outlook leads educated workers to demand more induce-

ments to be satisfied with their jobs (Mathieu, Hofmann, & Farr, 1993). Higher education broadens horizons, creating new ways of thinking and feelings of entitlement. These heightened expectations are not likely to be met in many correctional organizations (Jurik & Musheno, 1986; Rogers, 1991). Jurik, Halemba, Musheno, and Boyle (1987) define this occurrence as status inconsistency. Similarly, education should have a negative impact on commitment. Finally, education should exert a very small direct effect on turnover intent. In general, highly educated employees view themselves as having more career options than do less educated employees, and are more likely to feel that they can find employment elsewhere (Heffron, 1989). Nevertheless, the majority of the effect that education has on turnover intent should be indirect through job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Tenure has long been theorized to be associated with organizational commitment and turnover, largely in response to Becker's (1960) side-bet theory. Becker theorized that as length of employment increases, organizational commitment rises to reflect the increased investments made in the organization. Those with long service in an organization have too much to lose by leaving the organization. Over the years, long-term employees have invested in the organization, and these "sunken costs" bind them to the organization (Becker, 1960; Wallace, 1997). Therefore, tenure will have a negative relationship with turnover intent among correctional staff.

Tenure is also expected to be positively associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Generally, workers who have been with the organization for a long time probably have found a position with which they are satisfied and have bonded to the organization. Moreover, it is theorized that the majority of the total effects of tenure on turnover intent are moderated through job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Age is generally positively associated with job satisfaction. It is unclear if this relationship is the result of aging, a cohort effect, or a combination of both (Norval, Taylor, & Weaver, 1977). According to Wright and Hamilton (1978), advances in age increase an individual's prestige and confidence, hence contributing to a greater level of job satisfaction. The same positive relationship occurs between age and organizational commitment. According to Weiner (1982, p. 419), the positive relationship between age and organizational commitment reflects the growth and personal change of the individual in the development of identification with an organization. That is, there is a change in the orientation of the employee towards the employing organization as the employee matures (Cron, 1984). Therefore, there should be a positive

relationship between age and correctional staff job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Conversely, age is postulated to have an inverse association with turnover intent for correctional staff. Older workers have a greater stake in continuing employment than do younger employees. Older workers are more likely to have financial and familial obligations that necessitate continuing employment (Huczynski & Fitzpatrick, 1989). An increase in age usually leads to an increase in investments in work (e.g., retirement is only a few years away) and life in general (e.g., family responsibilities). There is also a perception that there are fewer job opportunities for older workers. Employers have been known to engage in age discrimination. While age should have a negative direct effect on turnover intent, it is postulated that the majority of the total effects will be moderated through job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The effect of gender on turnover is predicted to be indirect through job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Since women have fought long and hard to win the right to work in correctional facilities housing male inmates (Zupan, 1986), it is likely that female correctional workers will have higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment than their male counterparts. Many female staff members have made a conscious decision to work as a correctional staff member as a career choice, which leads to greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Male staff members are probably more likely to have accepted correctional employment due to the need for a paycheck.

The impact of race on turnover is also postulated to be indirect through job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Minorities should display lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment as compared to their white counterparts because of two factors. The first is that correctional administration tends to be dominated by whites, fostering the view that the organizational structure is unfair and lowering the level of organizational commitment among nonwhite workers. The second reason is that minority inmates often view nonwhite correctional employees as traitors working for the "system" and treat them more harshly. These factors may lead to lower job satisfaction over time. Since it is predicted that minorities will exhibit higher turnover rates, this area is a concern for correctional administrators who are striving to create and maintain a diverse workforce. Nevertheless, a higher turnover rate for minorities is not inevitable because it is predicted that the work environment initiates the turnover process.

While personal characteristics are salient, it is argued that work environment factors will be more important in shaping correctional staff job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similarly, it is

theorized that job satisfaction and organizational commitment will have much stronger effects on correctional staff turnover intent than personal characteristics. Jurik and Winn (1987) also maintained that correctional administrators place an undue emphasis on personal characteristics and mistakenly create profiles of persons who are inclined to quit or not to quit. This approach clearly overlooks the organizational factors that contribute to the voluntary turnover process. Instead, the focus should be on organizational traits that contribute to qualified employees quitting.

CONCLUSION

Correctional organizations serve an important function and require immense expenditures to operate and maintain. They also affect large numbers of individuals, be it staff, inmates, inmate family members, or the general public. Traditionally, issues like inmate subcultures, prison violence, legal intervention, recidivism, and incarceration conditions have intrigued correctional researchers. Employee issues, such as voluntary turnover, are just as complex, interesting, and important (Duffee, 1980). Since turnover is quite costly, it is critical to identify what causes voluntary separation. Reducing these negative work outcomes are of the utmost importance in an era of increased pressure to contain operating expenditures and meet the demands of a growing inmate population.

This paper has attempted to provide a framework for understanding correctional staff turnover. The next step, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is to test the model across different correctional settings and agencies. While model development is an important endeavor, one should recognize that this proposal is restricted to an examination of voluntary correctional staff turnover. There are many other ways for correctional staff members to withdraw from the job (Lambert et al., 1999). Workers with low levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment may become disillusioned with their positions, but feel unable to quit. These employees remain on the payroll, but are psychologically and emotionally absent from the job. Their reduced work input, higher absenteeism, and other maladaptive behaviors are harmful and damaging to the institutional well-being. Thus, while the proposed model concentrates on just correctional staff voluntary turnover, it may carry implications for many other staff-related problems that correctional administrators face today.

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