Turning Points in Correctional Careers: A Longitudinal Study of Occupational Stress, Trauma Exposure, Psychological Distress, and Suicide Risk among Correction Officers

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Statement of the Problem:
In the proposed research, we provide the first longitudinal study of occupational stress, trauma exposure, psychological distress, and suicide risk among newly hired correction officers. Our primary goal in this research is to distinguish the short and long term impacts of chronic operational and organizational stressors from the short and long term impacts of acute episodic stressors related to exposure to violence and traumatic incidents. We hypothesize that both have implications for officer health and wellness and propose to assess the independent and cumulative effects of each on a comprehensive set of measures of health, safety, and wellbeing of officers over time, controlling for the mediating and moderating effects of coping skills, social networks, and social supports.

Subjects:
We will follow the careers of 375 new correction officer recruits joining the Massachusetts Department of Correction between 2020 and 2022.

Partnerships:
This research will be conducted in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MADOC) and the Massachusetts Confederated Officers' Federated Union (MCOFU).

Research Design and Methods:
We collect longitudinal self-report data on safety, health and wellness through repeated interviews of new recruit correction officers and through the ongoing collection of administrative and personnel data related to their occupational experience. Each of the new officers will be interviewed every 12-18 months. We assess changes in the behavioral, emotional, physical, psychological, and relational health and wellbeing of these officers over the course of their careers beginning with their graduation from the academy.

Analysis:
The longitudinal nature of the data we collect will allow us to establish temporal ordering and identify causal relationships. We conduct panel analyses to develop a more comprehensive understanding of some of the risk factors for clinically elevated levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation that can serve as precursors to suicide.

Products Reports and Data Archiving:
We anticipate that these findings will inform the development of interventions tailored to the unique exposures and specific needs of correction officers. In addition to submitting a final report and archiving our final dataset at the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, we will publish our research for academic, practitioner, and public audiences.