

**THE IMPACT OF CORRECTIONAL OFFICER SUICIDE ON THE
INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND ON THE WELLBEING OF
CORRECTIONAL EMPLOYEES**

National Institute of Justice Award#: MU-MU-0010

Funding Period: 01/01/2017 – 12/31/2019

Amount of Award: \$500,000

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ABSTRACT

Background:

The rate of suicide among correctional officers in Massachusetts since 2010 has been at least five times higher than the national average and almost eight times higher than the suicide rate in the state. In the proposed research, we use a mixed-method approach to develop a nuanced and holistic understanding of the context within which correctional officer suicide occurs and to provide a comprehensive assessment of the effects of fatalities on the institutional environment and on the correctional staff working in these environments. This research involves a partnership between researchers at Northeastern University, the Office of Strategic Planning and Research at the Massachusetts Department of Correction, and the direct service providers at the Riverside Trauma Center (Riverside).

Research Design and Methods:

The proposed research will be conducted in discrete phases. In phase one, we will conduct independent case studies related to the 16 officers and retirees who have died by suicide since 2010 to identify any patterns or themes across the occupational lives of those officers. In phase two, through interviews and assessments administered to a random sample of up to 500 correctional officers, we will assess the impacts on attitudinal, behavioral, and psychological wellbeing outcomes on correctional officers and on the correctional environment. In phase three, we employ network analysis to understand how relational distance between an officer and a suicide is related to suicide ideation and indicators of wellbeing.

Analytical Approach:

The mixed-method approach proposed will allow us to triangulate across multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data and will allow for the analysis of data in phases. For the qualitative data, we will use a conventional content analysis approach to develop a participant driven understanding of the impacts of suicide.

Fixed effects regression models will be used to analyze the correctional officer survey data statistically controlling for the unique and unmeasured characteristics of each of the four institutions, but allowing for unbiased estimates of the individual officer characteristic effects on the outcomes of interest. Finally, network data will allow for a test of how relational distance between an officer and one who committed suicide is related to suicide ideation, health behaviors, and other indicators of wellbeing.

Conclusions/Outcomes:

We will provide the first comprehensive study of suicide among correctional officers, identifying key risk factors and addressing the impact of suicides on the overall institutional climate and on psycho-social wellbeing of those still working in the correctional environment.