



PRESS RELEASE

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Corrections Staff Dehumanize Incarcerated Individuals, Deem Themselves as Heroes to Justify Violence

Over the last century, scholars have devoted attention to understanding the implications of prison work in the context of rising levels of incarceration. In a new study, researchers conducted focus groups at every prison in Kentucky to investigate how correctional staff build and manage their identities. They found that staff have negative attitudes toward the incarcerated that are underpinned by sensational stories. They also found that staff treat the incarcerated as “others” to navigate the dehumanizing functions of the prison and frame their identity as heroes who must carry out the harms of the carceral state.

The study, by researchers at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) and the University of Louisville, appears in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

“The job of a corrections officer features many challenges, including overcrowding, understaffing, organizational demands, contradictory objectives, and calls to reform dehumanizing practices,” according to Ethan M. Higgins, assistant professor of sociology and criminology at UNC Wilmington, who led the study. “As corrections staff navigate the hardships of working in prisons, they try to find identity in their jobs.”

Prior research has explored an us-them ideology, with prison staff viewing the incarcerated as deserving of punishment, and for some staff, engaging in dehumanizing acts. Studies have found that prison staff use “othering”—the process of labeling some people as not fitting within the norms of a group—to promote security and reduce risk, especially with people they deem most dangerous. These practices can promote abuse and a culture of harm.

In this study, researchers conducted 18 focus groups with 180 correctional staff members in 12 adult prisons across Kentucky. They investigated staff perceptions of direct and indirect exposure to violence and trauma in prison and how these influenced the quality of life and mental well-being of staff.

The study found that correctional staff viewed incarcerated people as explicitly dangerous by using us-them distinctions and negative attitudes anchored by sensational cultural stories of the behavior of incarcerated people and epithets. Us-them constructions dehumanized the incarcerated as subhuman others who deserved any violence that might occur; they also crystallized staff members’ in-group cohesion and need for safety, as well as their importance as maintainers of social control.

These us-them distinctions leveraged what researchers termed a “warped badge of honor”: Staff described the considerable mental coping they take on—incurring “identity scars” that manifested in desensitization, dark humor, excitement about violence, and animalistic and violent thoughts or desires—to bear the burden of correctional work as heroes, guardians, and protectors of what they viewed as a greater public good.

“We considered how the carceral system promotes the dehumanization of incarcerated people and how correctional staff, acting as arms of the state, navigated the boundaries of



humanity and morality within that system, sometimes abetting the process via cultural responses to the structural conditions of their work,” explains Justin Smith, associate professor of sociology and criminology at UNC Wilmington, who coauthored the study.

“Our findings have implications for the quality of care that correctional staff provide to the incarcerated and how us-them ideologies—where staff frame the incarcerated as ‘monsters,’ ‘evils,’ or ‘nightmares’—may actively pave the way for potential abuses in prison,” adds Kristin Swartz, associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Louisville, who coauthored the study.

The study also has implications for prison management and the carceral system more broadly, including how staff maintain humanity while navigating a flawed prison environment.

Among the study’s limitations, the authors note that focus groups can discourage peripheral voices from being heard, especially if they deviate from group norms. Also, since the study took place in one state, its findings may not be generalizable to other areas.

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Summarized from Criminology, “*We Keep the Nightmares in Their Cages*”: *Correctional Culture, Identity, and the Warped Badge of Honor* by Higgins, EM (University of North Carolina Wilmington), Smith, J (University of North Carolina Wilmington), and Swartz, K (University of Louisville). Copyright 2022 The American Society of Criminology. All rights reserved.