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**Understanding Corrections Officer Safety in
Aotearoa New Zealand**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
at
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by
SAMANTHA TAAKA



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Abstract

Working as a corrections officer can be challenging; in addition to navigating occupational hazards in a complex environment, corrections officers are also at risk of being verbally and physically assaulted by prisoners. As such, corrections officers report high rates of physical injury and report high levels of symptoms of psychological and stress-related disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD, burnout). Corrections officers undergo the necessary task of managing prisoners and ensuring their needs are met, while risking their own safety and wellbeing to do so. Previous research has established that characteristics of prisoners, of officers, and of the prison environment contribute to the safety and wellbeing of corrections officers; however, this research is not comprehensive because studies typically examine only one type of characteristic (e.g., only prisoner characteristics or only officer characteristics, but not both). Likewise, some research examines strategies to improve corrections officer wellbeing, but again, this research is fragmented and limited in the sense that it focuses primarily on physical wellbeing and omits the emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing of officers. Therefore, in this thesis, we sought to examine multiple factors of prison work that may decrease the safety of corrections officers and identify strategies that may increase corrections officer overall wellbeing.

This thesis contains five studies that investigate what contributes to the safety of corrections officers in New Zealand prisons. The first study examined characteristics of prisoners that were predictive of violence against corrections officers at three levels of severity, using a database of 1,647 incidents of prisoner-to-officer assault. Prisoners who perpetrated serious violence against corrections officers were typically younger, higher security, gang affiliated and in directed segregation, compared to prisoners who perpetrated minor or moderate violence against corrections officers. In the second study, we extracted a subsample of incidents from the previous study to narratively analyse officers' written reports

of incidents of prisoner-to-officer assault to examine officer and situational characteristics that were predictive of violence at three levels of severity. Men were more commonly victims of serious violence compared to women, and some activities and locations in prisons (e.g., movements, prisoners' cells) were predictive of serious violence against officers.

The third study used interviews with 21 corrections officers and followed a grounded theory methodology to understand how corrections officers constructed their own safety in relation to their working relationships in prison. Corrections officers emphasised a necessity to develop positive working relationships with prisoners and colleagues to maintain their safety, and did so by being respectful and honest, and by using effective communication skills. The fourth study utilised the same data and methodology as study three to examine the strategies that officers used to keep safe while interacting with prisoners. Officers used some strategies consistently during their shift (e.g., alertness) and other strategies during specific interactions with prisoners (e.g., using physical measures during incidents of physical violence). Finally, in study five, we used the same data to capture how corrections officers perceived their emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing in relation to their work in prison. Officers described feeling stressed and emotionally exhausted due to their work in prison, which negatively impacted their personal lives outside of work.

Taken together, the results of this thesis indicate that there are characteristics of prisoners, of officers, and of the prison environment itself that contribute to serious harm towards corrections officers. On the other hand, there are also strategies that corrections officers use to increase their safety at work including both security-focused strategies (e.g., physical control and restraint) and relational skills (e.g., using communication to build a rapport with prisoners). This thesis examined corrections officer safety from a holistic approach by understanding how multiple factors contribute to the overall wellbeing of

officers, which establishes an empirical foundation for improving the safety and wellbeing of corrections officers in New Zealand.

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“Most people just want to do their time and go home—whether that be staff or prisoners.”

— *P14*

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List of publications

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles

- Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2025). Corrections officers' working relationships in prison and their effect of officers' perceived safety. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2025.2583100>
- Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Predicting physical violence against corrections officers across three levels of severity using individual and environmental characteristics. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 40, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241287802>

Conference Presentations

- Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2023, December). Correctional staff perspectives of violence and safety. Paper presented at: Aggression and the Mind, Wellington.
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Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, November). Characteristics of prisoner to correctional officer physical assault. Paper presented at: Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete Postgraduate Conference, Hamilton.

Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, September). Characteristics of prisoner to correctional officer physical assault. Paper presented at: Department of Corrections National Training Event, Rotorua.

Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, September). Characteristics of prisoner to correctional officer physical assault. Paper presented at: New Zealand Psychological Society, Auckland.

Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2022, July). Characteristics of prisoner to correctional officer physical assault. Paper presented at: Waikato Waitaha Forensic Psychology Conference, online.

Chapter One: Introduction

Working in prisons can be a difficult and dangerous job. During their regular shift, corrections officers are exposed to verbal abuse and threats, and are at risk of being physically assaulted by prisoners. It is well established that corrections officers report high rates of psychological consequences attributed to their role in prison, including high rates of PTSD and symptoms of depression and anxiety, and high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion that may impact their personal lives. Although the consequences of working in prison are far-reaching and well-documented internationally, less is known about how corrections officers in New Zealand themselves perceive their personal safety at work. Moreover, there is limited research that examines how corrections officers increase or maintain their safety at work. Therefore, using a mixed-methods approach, in this thesis we aimed to understand what decreases the physical safety of corrections officers and how corrections officers keep safe while working in New Zealand prisons. First, in chapter two we analysed a quantitative database of prisoner-to-officer physical assaults to identify prisoner characteristics that predicted prisoners perpetrating serious violence against officers. In chapter three, using the same quantitative database as chapter two, we manually coded a sample of incident reports to identify characteristics of officers and of the prison environment that predicted serious violence against officers. Next, in chapters four, five and six we reported the findings of qualitative interviews with corrections officers: in chapter four we analysed how officers' working relationships impacted their physical safety at work and in chapter five we examined strategies that officers used to keep safe while interacting with prisoners. Finally, in chapter six, we reported how working in prison reduced the emotional and social wellbeing of corrections officers. In this current chapter, we outline how aspects of working in prison impact corrections officer safety, including how violence, organizational

factors, and role-specific behaviours may reduce the physical, emotional, and social wellbeing of corrections officers.

The Role of Corrections Officers

More than 4,000 people work as corrections officers in New Zealand (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024a). Corrections officers are frontline staff of Ara Poutama Aotearoa because their roles require them to interact with prisoners. Corrections officers are responsible for the day-to-day running of units within prisons; they maintain the security of the prison and ensure that prisoners receive their minimum daily entitlements (e.g., minimum time unlocked from their cell, standard meals; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-a). These responsibilities include a range of tasks such as routinely unlocking and locking prisoners in their cells, moving prisoners within the unit and around the prison (e.g., from their cell to the exercise yard, outside of prison to attend court hearings), dispensing meals to prisoners in their cells, and attending to prisoners' requests (e.g., phone number approvals, property requests).

In research and in practice, as our collective understanding of effective rehabilitation has evolved, the responsibilities of corrections officers have also evolved (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Crewe et al., 2023; Nylander et al., 2011). Historically, corrections officers were considered 'guards', 'keepers' and 'wardens': their primary role was to provide prisoners with their minimum entitlements and prevent them from escaping. Now, the role of corrections officers is dual-faceted; officers still manage the security of the prison (i.e., a 'guarding' centric role) but officers may now contribute to managing prisoners' wellbeing by attending to their individual needs (i.e., a 'caring' centric role; Nylander et al., 2011). Caring for prisoners alongside guarding them adds a level of complexity to the role of corrections officers. However, in spite of this complexity, many people are motivated to join corrections to care for and contribute to prisoners' rehabilitation. In particular, many people who join corrections strive to 'make a difference' (Department of Corrections NZ, 2024; Miller et al.,

2023) in prisoners lives by adopting a humanising approach (e.g., supporting prisoners, talking with prisoners) in the prison environment. Indeed, corrections officers may feel like helping prisoners has provided them with a sense of purpose and may feel fulfilled by their work when they think they have made a positive difference in prisoners' lives (Miller et al., 2023).

While completing their duties, corrections officers are at risk of being verbally abused and physically assaulted by prisoners. Ara Poutama Aotearoa categorizes physical violence severity at three levels (i.e., No Injury¹, Non-serious², and Serious³) according to the severity of injuries that victims sustain (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2022). Between 2016 and 2020, there were 1,863 incidents of No Injury violence, 1,102 incidents of Non-serious violence, and 98 incidents of Serious violence against corrections officers in New Zealand prisons (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025a). Violence against corrections officers in New Zealand is increasing: between 2021 and 2025, there have been 2,736 incidents of No Injury violence, 1,434 incidents of Non-serious violence, and 115 incidents of Serious violence (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025a). On average, between 2016 and 2020 there were 6.17 assaults per year against officers per 100 prisoners; in comparison, between 2021 and 2025 there were 9.88 assaults per year against officers per 100 prisoners (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025a).

The Consequences of Working in Prison

Violence—particularly verbal abuse—is so prevalent in prisons that many corrections officers consider violence by prisoners as ‘part of the job’ (Burdett et al., 2018; Goulette et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Ricciardelli et al., 2018).

However, regardless of how normal violence may be considered to be, corrections officers

¹Physical violence that did not result in physical injuries or require any form of medical treatment.

²Physical injuries that required initial medical treatment but did not require ongoing medical treatment (e.g., a bloody nose, bites, cuts requiring stitches).

³Bodily harm “requiring medical intervention by medical staff followed by overnight hospitalisation” or “bodily harm requiring extended periods of on-going medical intervention”.

may still be negatively impacted by their work in prison. It is well established in previous research that corrections officers report high levels of physical (e.g., injury), psychological (e.g., symptoms and rates of psychological disorders, stress, fear, emotional exhaustion), and social (e.g., damaging social bonds with family, conflict with colleagues) consequences caused by their work in prison (Higgins et al., 2022b).

Physical Injury

Most physical injuries corrections officers sustain at work are caused by being directly assaulted by prisoners (Konda et al., 2013) and these injuries are typically minor or moderate injuries such as scratches, bruises, sprains, or dislocated bones (Konda et al., 2013; Light, 1991; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). Officers less commonly sustain serious injuries and life-threatening injuries (e.g., stab wounds, unconsciousness, injuries requiring emergency treatment) which require significant medical intervention and commonly involve long recovery processes that prevent officers from working (Bierie, 2012; Light, 1991; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011).

Psychological Consequences and Stress

Officers experience and witness a variety of psychologically distressing and traumatic incidents at work (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Higgins et al., 2022a). These incidents include behaviour directed toward officers (e.g., verbal abuse, threats, physical violence) but also include officers witnessing and responding to prisoner behaviour (e.g., fighting between prisoners, self-harm, suicidal behaviours). Because of their exposure to distressing events, it is therefore not surprising that corrections officers report high rates and symptoms of psychological disorders. Corrections officers report high levels of symptoms of depression and anxiety (Burdett et al., 2018; Fusco et al., 2021; Jaegers, 2020; Kinman et al., 2016; Kinman et al., 2017; Schwartz & Allen, 2024), high rates and symptoms of PTSD (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Fusco et al., 2021; Schwartz & Allen, 2024; Spinaris et al., 2012),

and high levels of other types of psychological distress such as panic disorders, sleep disorders and stress (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Burdett et al., 2018; Fusco et al., 2021; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015).

In addition to experiencing or witnessing potentially traumatic events in prison, other aspects of prison work may also reduce the wellbeing of corrections officers. In particular, organizational factors in prison (e.g., understaffing, lack of colleague or supervisor support, high workloads) may also contribute to officers' high levels of stress. Officers may even consider organizational components of their role *more stressful* than conflict with prisoners; occupational stressors may be less 'expected' than conflict with prisoners because of the perceived normality of violence in prison (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Johnston et al., 2024). Officers who do not feel supported by colleagues and supervisors, who perceive their unit to be understaffed or overcrowded with prisoners, and who consider their workload to be unreasonable, report high rates of stress (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Officers who feel more stressed also report higher levels of fear compared to officers who are less stressed (Fu et al., 2021; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015).

Organizational components may also directly affect how fearful officers are and how safe officers feel at work; officers who report a lack of supervisor or colleague support, high work demands, understaffing, and prisoner crowding perceive themselves to be at higher risk of being assaulted by prisoners, are more fearful of being assaulted, and feel less safe compared to officers who view those organizational components more favourably (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2018a; Lambert et al., 2018b; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Experiencing distressing events and managing organizational components of their role also contributes to corrections officers reporting high levels of emotional exhaustion (i.e., a symptom of burnout

where officers feel emotionally drained; Boudoukha et al., 2013; Clements & Kinman, 2021; Ricciardelli et al., 2018).

Social Consequences

The consequences of working in prison may extend beyond just officers themselves: officers' family or friends may be negatively impacted by their work (Burdett et al., 2018; Coulling et al., 2024; Eriksson, 2023; Kinman et al., 2017; Nylander et al., 2011). The social consequences of working in prison may be captured by Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) model of work-life-conflict, where the demands from one role (i.e., work) prevent a person from successfully fulfilling responsibilities in their other role (i.e., home). There are three types of work-life-conflict: time-, strain-, and behaviour-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins et al., 2022b). Time-based conflict occurs when the time demands of one role detracts from the time spent in the other role; in a prison context, officers working long shifts or doing overtime reduces the amount of time they can spend with their family (Higgins et al., 2022b). Strain-based conflict occurs when feelings developed from one role negatively impacts the other role; for corrections officers, being consistently exposed to violence may cause anxiety and irritability, which officers may 'take home' with them and 'take out' on their family (Higgins et al., 2023; Kinman et al., 2017). Behaviour-based conflict occurs when the behaviours used to be successful at work are inappropriate or detrimental at home; in a prison context, officers being 'tough' to protect themselves in prison may be poorly received at home if officers habitually treat their family the same way they treat prisoners at work (Higgins et al., 2022b).

Another social consequence that some corrections officers may experience is feeling undervalued or negatively perceived by society for their work in prison (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a; Liebling et al., 2011; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). In previous research, some corrections officers "see themselves as part of an unvalued,

unappreciated occupational group” (Crawley & Crawley, 2008, p. 134) where officers think that that society either considers them ‘tainted’ due to their work in prison or forgets about them completely (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). Some officers think that society views them negatively because of poor portrayals of prison work in movies or news media; certainly, the ‘failures’ of corrections officers (e.g., escapes, disturbances) receive far more attention in media compared to the consistent good work that officers do daily (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Higgins et al., 2022a; Liebling et al., 2011). As a strategy to cope with their negative reputation, some officers may develop protector mentalities and express that they only work in prison to protect society from the ‘nightmares’ that are housed within (Higgins et al., 2022a; Liebling et al., 2011).

Barriers to Help-Seeking and Coping

As we have outlined above, it is well established that corrections officers experience a variety of social, physical, and emotional consequences because of their work in prison; however, because the culture of prison work is typically masculine, it is not common for corrections officers to actively seek help to manage the pervasive impacts of their job (Clements & Kinman, 2021; Liebling et al., 2011). In prison work there is a prominent stigma against help-seeking, where corrections officers are expected to be “mentally tough and be able to handle everything [they] experience” (Coulling et al., 2024, p. 5; see also Clements & Kinman, 2021; Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2022; Liebling et al., 2011). Corrections officers describe being fearful or too proud to seek help for mental health struggles because they are concerned that their colleagues and managers will think they are weak, which could cause “irrevocable damage or spoilage to their occupational status” (Garrihy, 2022, p. 988; see also Coulling et al., 2024; Liebling et al., 2011).

Because of the barriers to help-seeking that accompany prison culture, corrections officers may seek other coping mechanisms (e.g., dark humour, problematic alcohol use, avoidance, social isolation) to provide relief from the negative emotions caused by their job (Burdett et al., 2018; Crawley & Crawley, 2008). However, while these coping mechanisms may provide short-term relief from negative feelings caused by their job, they may contribute to poorer outcomes for officers in the long-term (e.g., burnout; Johnston et al., 2024). Using harmful coping mechanisms to lessen the emotional consequences of prison may reduce officer wellbeing over time: officers who rely on “dysfunctional coping mechanisms” (Johnston et al., 2024, p. 3) are more likely to become burnt out compared to officers who do not use harmful coping mechanisms (Johnston et al., 2024). An example of a harmful coping mechanism is dark humour (i.e., comedy that makes light of subject matter that is considered in bad taste or taboo); corrections officers commonly engage in dark humour with their colleagues to lessen the trauma they are exposed to prison (e.g., violence, self-harm, suicide; Crawley & Crawley, 2008). However, if officers habitually use dark humour following traumatic incidents in prison, this coping strategy may slip into their personal life and elicit poor reactions from friends or family (e.g., their family may think they are unempathetic to the suffering of others; Garrihy, 2022).

Theories of Prison Violence

From previous research, clearly there are many negative consequences attributed to working in prison due to occupational stressors. However, it is less clear *why* violence occurs in prison: a topic that has been widely speculated and discussed across decades of prison research. In early prison literature, researchers commonly referenced two conceptual frameworks when theorising why prisoners use violence against staff and against other prisoners; these are the importation perspective (i.e., that prison violence is caused by characteristics that prisoners ‘import’ into prison with them; Irwin & Cressey, 1962) and the

deprivation perspective (i.e., that prisoners use violence in response to the deprived conditions of prison; Sykes, 1958). Traditionally, these perspectives were treated dichotomously: researchers would favour one perspective and disregard the other (Kelly-Corless & McCarthy, 2025). However, more recently, researchers have begun to agree that the importation and deprivation frameworks do not comprehensively explain prison violence together and therefore have begun to consider how other components of prison (e.g., situational factors, organizational factors) contribute to violence. Moreover, researchers have begun developing integrated frameworks that examine how individual, environmental, and organizational characteristics all interact to contribute to prison violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020).

Traditional Perspectives of Prison Violence: The Importation and Deprivation Perspectives

The importation perspective attributes prisoners' likelihood of engaging in misconduct and committing violence to pre-institutional characteristics that they bring with them into prison (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Prisoners' behaviour, attitudes, values and coping styles affect how they adapt to—and integrate themselves within—the prisoner subculture (Griffin & Hepburn, 2006; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). According to the importation perspective, people's historic behaviour is indicative of how they may behave inside of prison. For example, if prisoners held pro-criminal or anti-social attitudes prior to prison, these attitudes are likely to persist across environments and therefore may influence their attitude towards engaging in misconduct in prison (Irwin & Cressy, 1962).

The deprivation perspective posits that prisons are deprived environments, where prisoners suffer from the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958). These pains are the losses that prisoners experience by being removed from society, such as a loss of autonomy, the loss of access to goods and services, and loss of security or safety (Sykes, 1958). Prisoners develop a subculture among themselves, and behave according to the degree they are affected

by these pains: prisoners' behaviour is a reflection of their attempts to adapt to the prison environment and their efforts to overcome the losses suffered by being imprisoned (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020; Sykes, 1958). Some previous research has established associations between factors of deprivation (e.g., high noise levels, lack of privacy, environmental dilapidation, lack of autonomy) and negative outcomes for prisoners (e.g., misbehaviour, involvement in violence, feelings of powerlessness; Bieri, 2012; Crewe et al., 2023; Patrick, 1998).

While the traditional perspectives of prison violence offered frameworks for early prison research, these perspectives may overgeneralise prisoners' involvement in violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). For example, some prisoners may use violence indiscriminantly across different environments (e.g., units, prisons) regardless of the environment's level of deprivation, which challenges how the deprivation perspective conceptualises prison violence. On the other hand, importation theory is overly simplistic in that it posits that prison violence is caused by "bad apples" (Tamatea et al., 2023, p. 16) and does not adequately examine how these 'bad apples' may use violence to varying degrees in different environments (e.g., aggressive prisoners are not constantly being violent). Further, although both of these traditional perspectives offer frameworks for understanding prisoners' motivations for using violence, these perspectives typically generalise prisoners' use of violence in prison as a whole and do not determine whether the motivations for violence against officers differ compared to violence against other prisoners.

Modern Perspectives of Prison Violence: Situational and Organizational Factors

More recently, researchers have examined how prison violence occurs depending on situational characteristics of the environment (e.g., time of day, the physical architecture of the prison, locations within a prison), or organizational factors (e.g., staff turnover, understaffing, prisoner overcrowding; Gadon et al., 2006; McNeeley, 2021). The situational perspective is an opportunity-based perspective that suggests that certain aspects of the

environment provide more or less opportunity for prisoners to perpetrate violence. For example, prior research suggests that violence may occur more commonly during specific times of day compared to others, perhaps due to shift structures of officers or particular activities that occur during that time of day. Prisoners may be more likely to assault staff in the morning or early afternoon, because they are more likely to be unlocked during these hours and therefore have more contact with staff, thus creating greater opportunity to assault staff (compared to being locked in their cell overnight, for example; Cashmore et al., 2012; McNeeley & Donley, 2021; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). Violence is also more likely to occur in specific locations within prisons, such as near prisoners' cells (Bottoms, 1999; McNeeley, 2021; McNeeley & Donley, 2021; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2024) or in corridors while moving between locations (Sorensen et al., 2011).

Organizational factors (e.g., understaffing, overcrowding) may also contribute to high levels of violence in prison and negative outcomes for corrections officers (e.g., stress, fear, job dissatisfaction). For instance, prisons with higher rates of prisoner crowding and officer understaffing may also have higher rates of violence (Baggio et al., 2020). These organizational factors may reduce corrections officer safety by limiting officers' ability to effectively monitor their surroundings and proactively respond to potential conflict (Steiner, 2009). In addition to increased rates of violence, when units are overcrowded or understaffed, prisoners may have limited access to corrections officers and their individual needs may take longer to be met, resulting in "chaotic, tense and unpredictable" (Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023, p. 3) environments and increased frustration and aggression among prisoners (Crewe et al., 2011; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016; Wildeman et al., 2018). These organizational factors also have negative outcomes for corrections officers: when units are understaffed or overcrowded, officers may be overwhelmed with work demands and experience high levels

of stress, or officers may feel dissatisfied or disconnected from their role (Crewe et al., 2011; Liebling & Kant, 2018; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020).

Integrated Perspectives of Prison Violence

Although the classic perspectives of prison violence offer valuable insight into why prisoners may use violence, these perspectives have been criticised to be “inadequate as stand-alone explanations of the phenomenon” of prison violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020, p. 5). Examining situational and organizational factors of violence offers more insight, but even then, our scope of understanding is still narrow. Multi-level, integrated models such as the social control-opportunity perspective by Steiner and Woolredge (2020) examine how these perspectives of prison violence may *all* contribute to our overall understanding of why prison violence occurs—rather than each perspective explaining prison violence alone. Compared to stand-alone perspectives, integrated perspectives extend our understanding of prison violence by incorporating individual- and prison-level factors that may contribute to prisoners perpetrating violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020).

In other areas of literature, researchers have adopted ecological (or nested) approaches to examine other topics (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Dutton, 2006). In developmental psychology, Bronfenbrenner (1974) introduced the ecological systems theory and suggested that to understand an individual, we must understand how different ‘layers’ of an individual’s life (e.g., their family, peers, environment) interact to shape their behaviour. Guided by the ecological systems theory, Dutton (2006) proposed an ecological nested model to explain intimate partner violence. The ecological nested model consists of four layers and illustrates how an individual’s behaviour is influenced by factors such as their childhood experiences (i.e., the individual level), their family relationships or friendships (i.e., the microsystem level), their socioeconomic status or occupation (i.e., the exosystem level), and their ethnicity, culture or society norms (i.e., the macrosystem level). Guided by the limitations of traditional

perspectives of prison violence and the strengths of integrated and ecological approaches, below we describe risk factors of prison violence from an ecological approach by discussing multiple layers of risk factors.

Established Risk Factors of Prison Violence

Prisoner Characteristics

Extensive previous research has established who is most likely to perpetrate violence against officers: that is, prisoners' age, mental health, security classification, sentence status, gang affiliation, and previous history of violence outside of prison are predictors of prisoners engaging in violence inside of prison. First, compared to older prisoners, younger prisoners are significantly more likely to perpetrate violence toward both staff and other prisoners (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Lahm, 2009; Rocheleau, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2024). Much research also cites prisoners' poor mental health as a predictor of violence because these prisoners can be aggressive and unpredictable, which makes it challenging for officers to interact with them (Ferraresso & Peterson, 2025; Goulette et al., 2022; Rocheleau, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011).

The security classification of prisoners may also be predictive of their involvement in violence: prisoners who are classified as high security or maximum security are more likely to be involved in violence in prison compared to lower security prisoners (Brabyn et al., 2023; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Steiner, 2009). As a predictor of violence, security classification is perhaps not surprising: although prisoners are classified according to their individual characteristics and elements of their criminal career upon entering prison (e.g., age, offense history, risk of escape), their security classification may also change during their sentence depending on their behaviour (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-b). If prisoners are involved in violence in prison their security classification is reassessed and—depending on their role in the incident—they are likely to be classified as higher security than they were

before the incident (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-b). Similarly to their security classification, the sentence status of prisoners (i.e., whether they are sentenced or on remand waiting for their trial) is also predictive of prisoners' involvement in violence in prison (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Lahm, 2009; McNeeley, 2021; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2024). Prisoners on remand are more likely to be involved in violence in prison compared to sentenced prisoners (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). Remand environments are typically volatile: because prisoners typically do not reside in remand units for long periods of time, there is constant prisoner turnover which creates an unstable prisoner culture as power dynamics consistently shift depending on who leaves and who enters the unit (van Ginneken et al., 2017). Furthermore, remand prisoners may be highly anxious about their future, they may be concerned about their family and possessions outside of prison, and they may be detoxing from drugs and alcohol: causing them to be unpredictable and aggressive (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013).

Particularly relevant to the importation perspective, prisoners' attitudes toward—and engagement in—violence outside of prison are also predictive of their engagement in violence inside of prison (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Brabyn et al., 2023; Ferraresso & Peterson, 2025; Rocheleau, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2024). From an importation perspective, if people used violence outside of prison to respond to conflict, these attitudes and behaviours are likely to persist inside of prison, therefore these prisoners may continue to use violence to respond to conflict in prison (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Prisoners with histories of violent behaviour, who express pro-criminal attitudes, and who are gang affiliated are more likely to physically assault corrections officers compared to prisoners who do not have a history of violent behaviour, who express pro-social attitudes, and who are not gang affiliated (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Brabyn, et al., 2023; Ferraresso & Peterson, 2025; Rocheleau, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2024).

Prisoner Characteristics That Predict Serious Violence

Extensive research has established prisoner characteristics that are predictors of *any* physical violence against officers in prison; however, there is limited research that examines whether prisoner characteristics are predictive of *serious violence* against officers in prison. To our knowledge, there are two studies that have examined the relationship between prisoner characteristics and the severity of violence perpetrated by these prisoners (Brabyn et al., 2023; Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007). In a New Zealand study, Brabyn and colleagues (2023) found that prisoners having a high security classification and prisoners being gang affiliated were positively associated with their perpetration of serious violence (i.e., violence that resulted in more serious harm caused to victims). In a U.S. study, Cunningham & Sorensen (2007) found that prisoners who had previously perpetrated violence in prison, who were convicted of a violent crime, and who were younger were significantly more likely to perpetrate violence that resulted in serious injuries to victims, compared to prisoners who had not previously perpetrated violence in prison, who had not been convicted of a violent crime and who were older.

Corrections Officer Characteristics

Previous research also establishes who is most likely to be a victim of violence by prisoners. There are also some characteristics of corrections officers that are predictive of them being a victim of violence in prison: some of which are out of the control of officers (e.g., gender, age, their role and experience in prison) while others may be within an officer's autonomy (e.g., how they interact with prisoners and respond to conflict). First, although women who work in prison typically report feeling less safe, men who work in prison are more likely to be physically assaulted by prisoners (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Ferraresso & Peterson, 2025; Gordon et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Sorensen et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Men may be more likely to be assaulted

because of how officers interact with prisoners or because of prisoners' attitudes towards violence and traditional gender norms (Crewe, 2006; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Compared to women, men may be naturally—or purposefully—less nurturing: a characteristic that is not typically desired in a prison environment (Crawley & Crawley, 2008). As such, men may communicate with prisoners with less empathy and compassion compared to how women may communicate, which may be ineffective during a situation of escalating conflict (Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Further, because prison can be a harsh, masculine environment, there may be an expectation for officers to be tough and not back down from conflict with prisoners. Particularly for younger men who work in prison, officers may have difficulty conceding during conflict with prisoners and may feel a need to assert their power over prisoners, which could escalate minor conflict into violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2017).

On the other hand, prisoners' attitudes towards violence and beliefs regarding traditional gender roles may also contribute to men being at higher risk of being assaulted (Crewe, 2006). Older, married male prisoners may hold traditional beliefs that it is never acceptable to hurt a woman and that women should be protected: a belief that does not extend to male corrections officers (Crewe, 2006). For these prisoners, during conflict with officers, men may be the only acceptable target to express their aggression toward (Crewe, 2006). Furthermore, some prisoners that hold those traditional attitudes may consider themselves “guardians of female honour” (Crewe, 2006, p. 407) and may even rebuke other prisoners who treat women disrespectfully in prison.

Corrections officers who are younger and who have less experience working in prison may also be at higher risk of being assaulted by prisoners compared to older and more experienced officers (Gadon et al., 2006; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020; Walters, 1998). Although these characteristics are different (e.g., an officer can be older in age but have limited experience in prison), they may contribute to an officer's vulnerability

to being assaulted in similar ways. Officers who are younger and who have less experience working in prison may have less developed interpersonal skills or may be less confident in their abilities (Bottoms, 1999; Gadon et al., 2006; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020; Walters, 1998). As officers gain more experience in prison, they typically become more skilled and more confident in their authority (Walters, 1998). As a result of greater experience, officers are more skilled at monitoring situations for potential conflict, they may be better at verbally de-escalating conflict, and they may develop a rapport with prisoners over the course of their career (Bottoms, 1999; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Conversely, younger and less experienced officers may lack the ability to de-escalate conflict or may lack the rapport with prisoners that officers consistently draw on to maintain their safety (Liebling et al., 2011).

Skills that officers use to interact with prisoners may be developed over time as officers gain experience in prison. Officers who speak to prisoners with respect and who demonstrate a “firm but fair” (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016, p. 210) approach to interacting with prisoners may be safer compared to officers who interact with prisoners in an antagonistic or aggressive manner, and officers who exercise coercive power over prisoners (i.e., they may threaten to punish prisoners who are noncompliant; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). How officers interact with prisoners also has implications for their colleagues: officers who treat prisoners poorly may then put their colleagues at risk of prisoners ‘taking it out’ on them (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Higgins et al., 2023). By communicating with prisoners disrespectfully, officers may get prisoners “wound up” and they then may “blow off” on other corrections officers who are unprepared and caught off guard (Higgins et al., 2023, p. 1546).

Some officer behaviour that may decrease their safety may also be behaviour that is crucial to the role of corrections officers, for example: enforcing the rules. Some officers who enforce all rules—no matter how minor or superficial—may be simply following the rules as

taught to them in training (Ricciardelli et al., 2018). However, some conflict between officers and prisoners may escalate when officers discipline prisoners for minor rule infractions, even though they are required to by prison policy (Goulette et al., 2022). Moreover, in a study that examined the safety of corrections officers in Canada, some officers thought they had been specifically targeted by prisoners because they were simply following the rules (Ricciardelli et al., 2018).

Exposure to Violence: Representing the Justice System

Due to the nature of their role, corrections officers consistently interact with prisoners throughout their shift and therefore have greater opportunity to be exposed to violence compared to corrections staff who do not work in prisoner-facing roles (e.g., administrative staff, officers in the gatehouse; Boudoukha et al., 2013; Haynes et al., 2020). As such, corrections officers may be the “first to be exposed to inmates’ frustrations” (Boudoukha et al., 2013, p. 2343). This violence may not be personal: prisoners may indiscriminately assault any officer who is near during conflict (Light, 1991). On the other hand, aside from being convenient targets due to the level of exposure they have to prisoners, corrections officers may also represent the larger custodial process and be the “physical manifestation of authority” (Goulette et al., 2022, p. 24). Corrections officers are both the face of the prison system and are accessible to prisoners, therefore may be victims of violence that is motivated by frustration towards prison management or as an attempt to “resist the authoritative regime of the prison’s custodians” (Light, 1991, p. 249; see also Haynes et al., 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2018).

How Officers Keep Safe at Work

Developing the ‘Right Relationships’ With Prisoners

As briefly noted earlier, corrections officers have the complex task of managing two competing roles: one, *guarding* prisoners and ensuring the physical security of the prison, and

two, *caring* for prisoners by attending to their individual needs (Crewe et al., 2023; Nylander et al., 2011; Skeem et al., 2003). Although some people become corrections officers to help improve prisoners' lives, some officers may be too focused on the caring facet of their role and place less emphasis on the guarding aspect of their role (Crewe et al., 2023). Therefore it is important that officers develop the 'right' relationships with prisoners, rather than 'good' relationships with prisoners (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2017; Crewe et al., 2023). Developing the right relationships with prisoners may be a difficult balance to strike for officers; the right relationships may "lie somewhere between formality and informality, closeness and distance, policing-by-consent and imposing order" (Crewe et al., 2023, p. 926; see also Liebling et al., 2011). According to Ara Poutama Aotearoa, officers may develop the right relationships with prisoners by showing respect, being aware of prisoners' stress levels, and not crossing boundaries (e.g., not sharing personal information, not doing favours for prisoners; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2017).

Communication and Rapport With Prisoners

Developing the right relationships with prisoners means officers can have a rapport with them: a skill that some officers may purposefully use to keep themselves safe (Schultz, 2023). Because corrections officers generally interact with the same prisoners everyday, developing a rapport is integral to their safety (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Nylander et al., 2011; Patrick, 1998; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). Corrections officers are in a complex position: they routinely come into contact with the same prisoners throughout their shift and their career in prison, and therefore must be aware of maintaining peace with prisoners to ensure their safety in the future. For instance, if an officer speaks disrespectfully to a prisoner or treats them unfairly, that prisoner may target that officer for future violence. In contrast, if police officers treat offenders unfairly or disrespectfully, it is unlikely that they would be required to routinely interact with that offender in the future, so therefore there is limited risk

that their actions during an interaction with an offender may harm them in the future (Crawley & Crawley, 2008).

Because many people become corrections officers to help improve prisoners' lives, building a rapport with prisoners is an example of how corrections officers practice a humanising approach to their work in prison. Previous research suggests that corrections officers are "instrumental in determining prisoner quality of life" (Eriksson, 2023, p. 189). As such, having a rapport with prisoners helps officers effectively communicate with prisoners, because prisoners may feel comfortable to discuss their individual needs with officers and warn officers of potential risks to safety (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling & Kant, 2018; Liebling et al., 2011; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). For example, if officers share a rapport with prisoners, prisoners may warn officers before planned violence occurs (e.g., fights between prisoners, riots; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013).

Having a rapport with prisoners is not only vital for the individual safety of officers, it is also important for maintaining dynamic security and negotiating power between officers and prisoners (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Although corrections officers have formal power and authority in their position, there is some research that suggests that prisoners 'let' officers have authority (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Prisoners typically outnumber corrections officers in a unit: if prisoners wanted to, they could cause significant harm to corrections officers and major disruption in prison (e.g., riots; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Therefore, it is important for officers and prisoners to engage in a negotiation of power; officers may allow prisoners to maintain order within their own hierarchy by being more lenient with significant prisoners (i.e., leaders) and allowing these leaders to "regulate" (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020, p. 150) other prisoners in the unit (therefore reducing officers' workloads; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling et al., 2011). However, it is important to note that officers allowing these leaders to regulate other prisoners may also be detrimental to the welfare of these

‘regulated’ prisoners; leaders may use intimidating or threatening behaviour to keep other prisoners in order.

As discussed above, how officers communicate with prisoners could decrease their safety. On the other hand, communication is often cited by corrections officers as a strategy they consistently use to develop a rapport with prisoners and keep safe at work (Liebling & Kant, 2018). Although it is valuable for officers to be physically fit and strong, officers acknowledge that they cannot solely rely on their physicality to keep themselves safe and prefer using communication to maintain their safety (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). Moreover, because women are naturally not as physically strong as men, they may rely more on using communication to keep themselves safe at work (Burdett et al., 2018). Corrections officers may keep themselves safe by practicing a “relational but secure” (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016, p. 410) communication style, where they interact with prisoners honestly, consistently and without judgement. In particular, being consistent and fair while interacting with prisoners (e.g., treating all prisoners equally) helps officers develop good rapport with them by establishing themselves as a legitimate figure worthy of respect (Steiner & Woolredge, 2015; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Effectively communicating with prisoners facilitates dynamic security in a unit, where corrections officers use verbal techniques to maintain authority and order, rather than relying on enforcing the formal rules of prison (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Further, by using these positive communication techniques, officers increase their safety by establishing themselves as worthy of respect by prisoners and by developing a rapport with prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016).

Working Relationships With Colleagues

Working relationships between colleagues are also important for officer safety: officers who experience positive working relationships with colleagues and who feel more supported by colleagues may feel less stressed at work and be less fearful of being physically

assaulted by prisoners (Lambert et al., 2018b; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). In prison, there is a strong ‘in-group’ culture where officers rely on each other for their physical, emotional and social safety (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Schultz, 2023). Corrections officers rely on their colleagues to keep them physically safe by providing support during incidents of conflict with prisoners (e.g., responding to distress alarms, participating in physical restraint against prisoners) and they rely on their colleagues to maintain professional boundaries with prisoners to reduce the risk that officers may be manipulated (Goulette et al., 2022; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Officers on the outskirts of this in-group may be fearful that their colleagues will not support them or keep them safe (e.g., their colleagues may not respond if they activate their distress alarm; Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Liebling & Kant, 2018). Regarding emotional and social support, because of the nature of their role (i.e., working in a secure environment that is typically out of the public eye) officers may feel misunderstood by ‘outsiders’ (i.e., people who do not work in prison) and therefore rely on their colleagues for social support (Schultz, 2023).

Physical Skills

Corrections officers are also trained in physical measures that they may use according to the severity of incidents with prisoners (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c). One such skill is physical control and restraint, where officers may use approved physical techniques to restrain aggressive prisoners who pose risk to officers, other prisoners, or themselves. During incidents of conflict, using physical measures proactively (i.e., before prisoners can assault officers) may be an effective strategy to reduce the likelihood officers are seriously harmed (McNeeley, 2021; McNeeley & Donley, 2021). Less commonly, in more serious incidents of violence (e.g., situations where the prisoner is very aggressive, where there are limited officers around, or where the prisoner has already assaulted an officer) corrections officers may also use pepper spray to control the situation (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c, McNeeley

& Donley, 2021). However, it is important to note that in New Zealand, there are strict policies that govern officers' use of physical measures against prisoners (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c; Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005). Officers may use physical measures if they have “exhausted every effort to defuse a situation peacefully without the need of force” (i.e., they have attempted other measures such as verbal de-escalation) and they must only use force that is proportionate to the severity of the incident (i.e., they may not use control and restraint against a prisoner who does not pose a risk to them; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c).

The Current Thesis

Although there is extensive literature about corrections officers and their safety, this previous research is fragmented: to our knowledge, there is no existing research that examines corrections officer safety holistically. That is, studies typically assess one outcome for corrections officers and no one study captures how corrections officers are affected by violence physically, emotionally *and* socially. Furthermore, until recently, most previous research has examined violence against corrections officers using single-level measures: in this thesis, we aimed to understand corrections officer safety from an ecological perspective by incorporating individual- (e.g., prisoner and officer characteristics), relationship- (e.g., rapport with prisoners, working relationships with colleagues), prison- (e.g., environmental and situational characteristics) and cultural-level factors (e.g., societal perspectives of prison, officer subculture) to understand how corrections officers experience and perceive violence in prison. Therefore, this thesis was guided by two overarching questions:

1. What are the predictors of harm against corrections officers?
2. How do corrections officers perceive and construct their personal safety at work?

The first chapter of thesis provided an overview of relevant research findings on how corrections officers are impacted by violence in prison, frameworks of prison violence,

factors that contribute to the risk of violence occurring, and the strategies officers use to keep safe in prison. Chapter two contains our first quantitative study: “Predicting Physical Violence Against Corrections Officers Across Three Levels of Severity Using Individual and Environmental Characteristics”, which was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. In this manuscript, we used a centralised electronic database of physical assaults by prisoners towards corrections officers to examine whether individual characteristics of prisoners were predictive of more serious harm against corrections officers. Chapter three includes our second quantitative manuscript: “A Narrative Analysis of Incident Reports to Examine the Similarities and Differences of Prisoner-to-Officer Assault Across Three Levels of Severity”. In this study, we extracted a subsample from the same centralised electronic database used in manuscript one, to narratively analyse officers’ written reports of incidents of violence by a prisoner towards a corrections officer.

Chapters four and five contain manuscripts three and four respectively, both of which are qualitative studies that used semi-structured interviews to develop a theoretical model of how corrections officers constructed their personal safety at work. For these studies, we conducted interviews with 21 corrections officers who worked in New Zealand prisons and followed a grounded theory methodology to understand corrections officer safety from a lived-experienced perspective. Manuscript three, titled “Corrections Officers’ Working Relationships in Prison and Their Effect on Officers’ Perceived Safety” has been accepted for publication in *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* at the time of submission. Manuscript four, titled “Strategies Corrections Officers use to Keep Safe During Interactions With Prisoners”, explored the different strategies corrections officers used during interactions with prisoners of varying degrees of intensity.

From our quantitative and qualitative studies, we established factors that impacted the physical safety of corrections officers. However, we had not yet thoroughly examined other

aspects of safety: specifically, the emotional and social wellbeing of corrections officers. Therefore, in chapter six, we utilised the same interview data from manuscripts three and four to understand how working in prison impacted the emotional wellbeing of corrections officers and how their work impacted their life outside of prison. Because this chapter examined aspects of corrections officer safety outside of their physical safety, this chapter contributed to our understanding of corrections officer safety holistically. Finally, in chapter seven, we integrate the key findings across all of our studies, discuss the theoretical and practical implications that emerged from this thesis, present some strengths and limitations of this thesis, and offer directions for future research. Note that for manuscripts that have been published in academic journals, we included an abstract at the beginning of each chapter to indicate they are stand-alone published works; we did not include abstracts for chapters of this thesis that are otherwise unpublished.

Chapter Two: Manuscript One

Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Predicting physical violence against corrections officers across three levels of severity using individual and environmental characteristics. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 40, 1-26.
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Abstract

Working in prisons can be a challenging job; managing a population of incarcerated people while keeping oneself, one's colleagues and the people themselves safe. Some corrections officers may expect violence in the workplace, yet being a victim of violence is no trivial experience. In prison, violent incidents are categorised according to the severity of the violence perpetrated. However, we do not know how characteristics of a violent incident may contribute to the severity of violence perpetrated towards correctional staff. To begin to address this gap, we examined characteristics of physical assault incidents in New Zealand prisons between 2016 and 2020, in which the perpetrator of the incident was a male prisoner and the victim was a corrections officer. We examined the prediction of incidents across three levels of severity using individual and environmental characteristics. Perpetrators of serious violence tended to be already segregated from the general population at the time of the assault, and are therefore at higher risk of perpetrating violence where the corrections officer sustained more severe injuries. We also found that perpetrators of assault against staff have defining differences compared to the general prison population: prisoners who assaulted staff were more likely to be younger, gang affiliated, and have higher security classifications compared to prisoners who did not assault staff. Research suggests that characteristics of perpetrators can contribute to their risk of perpetrating violence; we expand on this by finding that characteristics of perpetrators (i.e., being segregated) can also contribute to the severity of violence perpetrated. Furthermore, we offer a direct comparison between prisoners who assaulted staff and prisoners who did not; therefore cementing research that prisoners who assaulted staff are different from the rest of the prison population.

Key words: prison violence, corrections officer safety, violence severity, prisoner-staff assault, prisoner assault.

Examining physical violence against corrections officers across three levels of severity using individual and environmental characteristics

Most people do not go to work expecting to be verbally and physically assaulted. For corrections officers who work in prisons, verbal abuse, threats, and risk of physical harm are facets of everyday work experience. Corrections officers undertake one of the most dangerous occupations; they need to be hypervigilant in order to manage the safety of incarcerated people, while also maintaining their own safety and that of colleagues (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). The occurrence of prisoner assaults on staff is related to the characteristics of the perpetrators, the victims, and the environments in which violence occurs (McNeeley, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). However, there is limited research about whether these characteristics differ depending on how *seriously* a prisoner assaults staff. In this study, we use a centralised database of physical assault incidents toward staff in New Zealand prisons to examine perpetrator and environmental characteristics of assault incidents at three levels of incident severity.

Many corrections officers have roles that require them to continuously interact with prisoners, enforce rules, and mediate interactions between prisoners when there is potential or actual conflict (Ellison & Caudill, 2020). As a result, corrections officers are employed in one of the most dangerous occupations (Gordan et al., 2012); they experience high rates of physical injuries and violent victimisation in the workplace across an international scope (Duhart, 2001; Giannini, 2021; Gordan et al., 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2022). In New Zealand, physical violence against corrections officers has been increasing (0.18 serious assaults on staff per 100 prisoners in 2018, compared to 0.30 serious assaults on staff per 100 prisoners in 2023; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2022; Cook, 2020) and corrections officers' levels of stress are also increasing, partly because of their concerns about being victims of violence (Christian, 2018; Mead, 2021). Some corrections officers have described the tense

environment within prisons as a “pressure cooker” and reported fearing for their safety (Christian, 2018).

Corrections officers report high rates of PTSD, and high levels of: stress, burnout, symptoms of depression and anxiety, stress-related health problems, and negative coping strategies (e.g., substance abuse; Boudoukha, et al., 2013; Fusco et al., 2021; Jaegers et al., 2020; Jaegers et al., 2022; Kinman et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2010; Spinaris et al., 2012; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). In addition to the negative consequences outlined above, corrections officers also have limited options for avoiding activities or places where they may no longer feel safe, like victims of violence in the general community may (Spinaris et al., 2012; NZ Ministry of Justice, 2022). Corrections officer roles often require contact with prisoners, which may be distressing for staff who have been assaulted by a prisoner (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Spinaris et al., 2012), and may cause them to feel fearful or unsafe at work (Gordon et al., 2012). To manage feeling unsafe, staff may avoid work or resign from their position, contributing to understaffing (Lambert et al., 2010).

Predictors of Prisoner-Staff Assaults

Prisons can be viewed as ecosystems, where characteristics across multiple levels interact in the occurrence of an incident of physical assault (Tamatea et al., 2023). Characteristics at the individual level (i.e., individual characteristics of the perpetrator and victim), interact with characteristics at the relationship level (i.e., the relationship between perpetrator and victim) which are encompassed in characteristics of the spatial and temporal environment of the prison. Various variables from different parts of the eco-system have been examined previously (Steier & Woolredge, 2020; Lahm, 2009); we briefly review a selection of perpetrator, victim and environmental characteristics that are relevant to this study.

Perpetrator Characteristics

Common characteristics of prisoners who are likely to assault staff include: being younger, having a minority ethnic identity, and having a history of violent behaviour (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Sorensen et al., 2011; McNeeley, 2021). Gang membership also increases a prisoner's likelihood of committing violence in prison. On average, gang members have higher levels of violent misconduct, including physical assault against other prisoners and staff members, compared to people who are not gang members (Brabyn et al., 2023; Pyrooz et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2024; Worrall & Morris, 2012).

Victim Characteristics

Prison violence can occur after considerable planning or may unfold rapidly and spontaneously, and perpetrators of violence may rationally decide who to assault based on the characteristics of their potential victims (Sorensen et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Corrections officers are more likely to be assaulted by a prisoner if they are men, younger, and have less experience in their role (Sorenson et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Younger and less experienced staff may be perceived as more vulnerable due to being less confident in their role compared to their older, more experienced counterparts (Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Men are more likely than women to be assaulted by prisoners (Cashmore et al., 2012; Konda et al., 2013; Sorensen et al., 2011; Wolff et al., 2007) because women may more commonly than men use verbal strategies to de-escalate situations before the progress to physical violence (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006). On the other hand, men may be more likely to be assaulted by prisoners who adhere to traditional gender roles (Crewe, 2006). In a traditional gender-role perspective, men may disapprove of physical violence toward women (Crewe, 2006), and therefore male staff may be considered a more acceptable target of violence.

Population-based, Environmental, And Situational Characteristics

Several population-level characteristics may be related to risk of staff assaults, although relevant research mainly focuses on prison violence in general, rather than specifically toward staff. The security classification for a unit or prison is one such population feature. Because security classification is based on risk factors for violence such as age, offence history, and risk of escape, higher security prisons contain prisoners with higher levels of estimated violence risk (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.). Because these prisoners have a higher estimated risk of perpetrating violence, staff who are tasked with managing them are already at higher risk of violence victimisation. But the regimes themselves may also contribute to violence.

The rate of prisoner turnover is an example of a regime-based factor; the stability of the residents in a prison relative to the volume of new prisoners entering and leaving may also contribute to the general level of tension and potential for violence in a prison (Baggio et al., 2018; Baggio et al., 2020). Higher rates of turnover in a prison or unit are associated with higher levels of violent infractions, prisoner self-harm and prisoner suicide (Baggio et al., 2018; Baggio et al., 2020; van Ginneken et al., 2017).

Other characteristics of the regime can also contribute towards physical violence. Times of day when prisoners are “unlocked” and activities when prisoners have more opportunity to move around the prison and interact with corrections officers (e.g., recreation, employment) may be riskier. For example, in some prisons, riskier times include the afternoons when prisoners may have more free time (McNeeley, 2021) or alternatively when prisoner’s cells are first unlocked in the morning (Sorensen et al., 2011).

Severity of Prisoner-Staff Assaults

Although considerable research has been conducted on prison violence, including violence toward staff, the relative severity of incidents has not been subject to much research

attention. One study (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007) suggested that some characteristics of perpetrators (i.e., age and criminal history) are associated with more serious incidents of general prison violence. They examined violence perpetrated by close custody prisoners (i.e., prisoners maintained within an armed perimeter or under direct armed supervision when outside of a secure perimeter). They found that prisoners who were younger, had previously perpetrated violence in prison, and who were convicted of a violent crime were significantly more likely to commit assaults resulting in serious injuries compared to older prisoners, prisoners who had not previously perpetrated violence in prison, and who were not convicted of a violent crime. However, there is limited research about whether characteristics of perpetrators are associated with more serious outcomes specifically in relation to assaults on staff, nor has previous research compared predictors of different levels of prisoner assault severity.

Current Study

This study uses official incident data recorded by corrections officers, to examine the environmental, situational and perpetrator variables related to assaults on corrections officers perpetrated by a single male prisoner. Our aims were to (a) describe the characteristics of assault incidents and their perpetrators, (b) examine their similarities and differences across three levels of assault severity, and (c) compare the characteristics of assault perpetrators with the remainder of the prison population.

Method

Data Source

Ara Poutama Aotearoa (the New Zealand Department of Corrections) operates 18 adult prisons for 8,118 prisoners (as of June 2023). Sentenced prisoners are managed across five

security levels (Minimum, Low, Low-Medium, High, Maximum⁴), but 43.4% of prisoners are on remand awaiting conviction and sentencing. They are managed in high-security units. Corrections officers routinely document incidents concerning prisoner behaviour (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.). Incident reports are legal documents and form a record of prisoners' experiences and behaviour during their time in custody. Incidents range from the mundane (e.g., routinely escorting a prisoner to the dentist) to serious events (e.g., medical emergencies, accidents, assaults). We examined all incidents comprising a physical assault of a corrections officer by a prisoner, that corrections officers recorded between 2016 and 2020 in the centralised electronic database,

The initial dataset consisted of 3,392 such incidents. We removed those incidents in which the role of the prisoner was unknown or listed as the victim of the incident ($n = 112$); those in which the perpetrator was a woman ($n = 365$); incidents with multiple perpetrators ($n = 1,212$); incidents of a sexual nature ($n = 39$); and incidents with insufficient information about the perpetrator, such as their security classification or age ($n = 17$), leaving a final dataset of 1,647 incidents in which a single male prisoner physically assaulted a corrections officer within a New Zealand prison. We excluded incidents in which the perpetrator was a woman, or there were multiple perpetrators, or the incident was sexual in nature because the complexity of these characteristics warrant more consideration and analysis than we could cover in the scope of this paper. Men make up 94% of New Zealand's prisoner population, and most incidents were perpetrated by a lone individual, so we selected our dataset with the intention of understanding physical incidents perpetrated by a male prisoner acting alone. No details were available about the corrections officers who were the victims of the incidents⁵.

⁴ Fifteen of these prisons house 7,863 men; the remaining 3 are women's prisons; women comprise fewer than 6% of the prison population. Typically each prison comprises units at a variety of security levels.

⁵ As of June 2022 Ara Poutama employed 9,694 people, 89.8% of whom worked on the frontline in prisons. Men and women were evenly represented, more than two thirds were European and more than one fifth were Māori; the average age of staff was 46 years old, and the average length of service was 8 years, 9 months.

Three types of physical assault incidents were recorded: *No Injury*, *Non-Serious*, and *Serious* incidents. Staff allocate a severity level to the incident based on the severity of the officer's injuries and the degree of medical attention required to treat the injuries. In *No Injury* incidents the victim sustained no injuries as a result of the physical assault. In *Non-Serious* incidents the victim's injuries were treated with basic first aid (e.g., superficial cuts, bruises). In *Serious* incidents, injuries included fractures, loss of consciousness, and concussions, and required off-site outpatient care, or hospitalisation (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2022).

The database included perpetrator characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, security classification, adjudication status, gang affiliation, RoC*RoI score [see below]). Security classification refers to the current level of supervision deemed appropriate by Ara Poutama Aotearoa to contain a sentenced prisoner, based on the internal and external risk posed (minimum, low, low-medium, high, maximum; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.). The adjudication status of the perpetrator referred to whether the perpetrator was serving his sentence, or was still on remand awaiting trial or sentencing at the time of the incident (i.e., remand-accused, or remand-convicted). The gang affiliation of a prisoner was recorded by staff if the prisoner disclosed gang connections, their behaviour indicated gang connections (e.g., frequent associations with known gang members in the prison exercise yard), or their person or property was associated with gang connections (e.g., tattoos, clothing, other personal property; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.). Staff may also identify prisoners as gang affiliated if information is received from communications disclosures (e.g., Intel, mail, visitors). The RoC*RoI is an actuarial risk assessment tool based on social, demographic, and offence history variables (i.e., gender, age, age at first offence, length of time between offences) used by Ara Poutama Aotearoa that estimates the likelihood of an individual

returning to prison in the next five years for a new conviction, (low, medium or high risk; Bakker et al., 1999; Johnston, 2021).

Environmental variables included incident information (e.g., time of day, location of the incident). The location of the incident was coded as private (i.e., in or directly around cells) or common areas (i.e., the receiving office, visits). Incidents that had no location information were coded as missing. For incidents that occurred in private locations, the database contained information about the security classification of the unit in which the incident occurred. We were also able to access additional officially recorded information about the unit the perpetrator resided in at the time of the assault, including an estimate of the turnover in the unit. Turnover was measured for each unit in which the incident's perpetrator resided at the time of the incident, and was the rate at which the population of the unit renewed; a higher rate of turnover indicated less stability in the population of the unit⁶. We were also able to access an average rate of turnover across all units in New Zealand, between 2016 and 2020. All variables based on information not directly related to the incident itself were documented monthly and were extracted from the nearest record *prior* to the assault (i.e., not more than 30 days before the incident).

Because prison populations are highly variable between years or even months, we calculated an average number of people in prison at any one time (which we have called "Total Population" for simplicity) to compare to our sample of prisoners who assaulted corrections officers. To make this comparison, we first calculated the population characteristics for each month in the sample time frame (60 months total, between 2016 and 2020), then we averaged each variable across the 60 months. For example, we calculated the

⁶ Turnover was calculated as follows: $\frac{(\alpha - \chi)}{(\beta - \chi)}$, where α represents the number of unique prisoners in a unit, β represents the maximum number of months the total prisoners could be in the unit (number of prisoners * number of months in a year * number of years in the unit), and χ represents the minimum number of months prisoners could be in the unit.

proportion of prisoners who were European for each month between 2016 and 2020, then we calculated the average of those proportions. The total population comparison group included all men who had been housed in a New Zealand prison between 2016 and 2020 for any duration of remand or sentence ($n = 9202$), who did not physically assault a staff member and were therefore not in the staff-assault perpetrator sample.

Analytic Plan

We used IBM SPSS Statistics version 28 for all analysis. First, we conducted descriptive analyses on the complete cleaned incident dataset ($n = 1,647$) to identify the common characteristics of prisoner-staff physical assault incidents. Second, we conducted bivariate analyses to examine associations between person and incident characteristics, and the severity of incidents. To address our third aim, we compared the prisoners who assaulted corrections officers with the remaining total population of the prison during that period who had no recorded incident of corrections officer assault.

Results

Characteristics of Perpetrators Who Physically Assaulted Staff

The 1,647 physical incidents were perpetrated by 1,087 men who were housed in a New Zealand prison for some period of time between January 2016 and December 2020. Almost three quarters of perpetrators committed a single assault, almost a quarter of perpetrators committed fewer than five assaults, and 3% of perpetrators committed five assaults or more. Table 1 depicts the characteristics of the assault perpetrators, first by the total sample, then by the severity of the incident. As shown in the first column of Table 1, a majority of the sample were Māori, and approximately one fifth were European.

As shown in the first column of Table 1, the mean age of perpetrators was 29.56 years (range 17-81). Half of perpetrators were recorded as gang affiliated. The majority were sentenced, with just under half on custodial remand (i.e., pre-conviction or convicted and

awaiting sentencing) at the time of the assault. More than half of the men did not have a security classification, mostly because only sentenced prisoners are assigned a security level. Of the men with a security classification, most were classed as high security. More than a fifth of men were in voluntary segregation—where prisoners are segregated from the main prisoner population at their own request, but can circulate freely with other segregated prisoners—and over a third were in directed segregation—where the prisoner is segregated by prison management, in response to concerns about the risk a prisoner may pose to others—at the time of the assault.

Characteristics of Incidents

Almost two thirds of incidents were classified as No Injury ($n = 1,009$; 61.3%), followed by Non-Serious ($n = 584$; 35.5%). Serious incidents accounted for fewer than 4% of the total incidents ($n = 53$; 3.3%). The majority of incidents occurred in private locations within the prison (i.e., in or directly around cells). The remaining incidents occurred in common areas (e.g., in the Receiving Office where prisoners are received into the prison on arrival, the visits room) or the location information was missing. For all incidents that occurred in a private location, more than half occurred in high security units for Remand prisoners and two fifths occurred in high security units for Sentenced prisoners⁷. The most common time of day for incidents to occur was between 8am and 12pm, followed by between 12pm and 4pm.

⁷ We did not have any unit information for incidents that occurred in public areas.

Table 1*Perpetrator and Environmental Characteristics, by Total Incident Sample and Incident Severity Subsamples*

Variable	Total		No Injury (n = 1009)		Non-Serious (n = 584)		Serious (n = 54)		F	p	df
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Age of perpetrator	29.56	9.22	29.79	9.47	29.21	8.85	29.00	8.46	.846	.429	2
Perpetrator RoC*RoI	.64	.20	.65	.19	.64	.21	.63	.24	.326	.722	2
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	χ^2	p	
Ethnicity									19.06	.015	
Māori	985	59.8	604	59.9	347	59.4	34	63.0			
European	337	20.5	208	20.6	124	21.2	5	9.3			
Pasifika	266	16.2	171	16.9	84	14.4	11	20.4			
Other	38	2.3	17	1.7	17	2.9	4	7.4			
Not recorded	21	1.3	9	0.9	12	2.1	0	0.0			
Gang Affiliated	829	50.3	498	49.4	297	50.9	34	63.0	3.895	.143	2
Adjudication Status									33.929	<.001	4
Sentenced	848	51.5	573	56.8	248	42.5	27	50.0			
Remand – Accused	576	35.0	325	32.2	234	40.1	17	31.5			
Remand – Convicted	223	13.5	111	11.0	102	17.5	10	18.5			
Security Classification of Prisoner									56.77	<.001	10
Minimum	28	1.7	21	2.1	7	1.2	0	0.0			
Low	56	3.4	37	3.7	16	2.7	3	5.6			
Low medium	166	10.1	121	12.0	39	6.7	6	11.1			
High	390	23.7	282	27.9	96	16.4	12	22.2			
Maximum	167	10.2	93	9.2	68	11.6	6	11.1			
Unclassified	840	51.0	455	45.1	358	61.3	27	50.0			
Voluntary Segregation	371	22.5	232	23.0	132	22.6	7	13.0	2.96	.228	2
Directed Segregation	630	38.3	336	33.3	257	44.0	37	68.5	39.61	<.001	2
Time of Day									13.46	.199	10

0000-0359	21	1.3	16	1.6	4	0.7	1	1.9		
0400-0759	53	3.2	31	3.1	21	3.6	1	1.9		
0800-1159	727	44.1	428	42.4	269	46.1	30	55.6		
1200-1559	520	31.6	319	31.6	185	31.7	16	29.6		
1600-1959	298	18.1	201	19.9	92	15.8	5	9.3		
2000-2359	28	1.7	14	1.4	13	2.2	1	1.9		
Location									10.74	.030
Private	1411	85.7	878	87.0	486	83.2	47	87.0		
Common areas	116	7.0	57	5.6	57	9.8	2	3.7		
Missing	120	7.3	74	7.3	41	7.0	5	9.3		
Characteristics of private incidents	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
Turnover of unit	0.38	0.19	0.36	0.18	0.41	0.18	0.28	0.22	27.44	<.001
Security Classification of Remand Units	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	3.99	.678
Low medium	12	1.5	4	0.9	8	2.4	0	0.0		
High	438	54.8	239	54.8	183	54.5	16	59.3		
Maximum	29	3.6	18	4.1	10	3.0	1	3.7		
Missing	320	40.1	175	40.1	135	40.2	10	37.0		
Security Classification of Sentenced Units									27.05	<.001
Minimum	3	0.4	2	0.3	1	0.4	0	0.0		
Low medium	138	16.3	104	18.2	24	9.7	10	37.0		
High	345	40.7	245	42.8	92	37.1	8	29.6		
Maximum	142	16.7	91	15.9	47	19.0	4	14.8		
Missing	220	25.9	131	22.9	84	33.9	5	18.5		

Note. Remand prisoners do not have an allocated security classification. They are usually housed separately from sentenced prisoners.

We did not have unit information about incidents that occurred in common areas, including the turnover and security classification of the unit.

Some of these incidents occurred in spaces shared by multiple units, or where prisoners from multiple units might be mixing (e.g., kitchens, program areas).

The security classification of the units in which the incident occurred may differ from the security classification of the perpetrator: prisoners may be placed in units with a higher classification than their own due to availability of beds in other units.

Perpetrator, Unit and Incident Characteristics by Severity of Incidents

As shown in Table 1, there were significant relationships between the severity of the incident and the following perpetrator characteristics: perpetrator ethnicity, adjudication status, and whether the perpetrator was in directed segregation. Compared to the overall sample and to perpetrators of less serious incidents, Pasifika prisoners and prisoners who fit in the Other ethnicity category were overrepresented as perpetrators of Serious incidents⁸. Sentenced prisoners were overrepresented as perpetrators of No Injury incidents compared to prisoners on Remand. Staff also appeared to be at significantly increased risk of serious assault from Directed Segregation prisoners; more than two-thirds of the perpetrators of Serious incidents were already in Directed Segregation—which is typically used for prisoners where there is a concern that they are at risk from or pose a risk to other prisoners—prior to the incident. In comparison, one third of perpetrators of No Injury incidents and fewer than half of perpetrators of Non-Serious incidents were in Directed Segregation prior to the incident occurring.

We also found significant relationships between the severity of the incident and the following environmental variables: the location of the incident, security classification of units that house sentenced perpetrators, and the turnover rate of the unit in which the perpetrator lived. Serious incidents were less likely to occur in common areas compared to No Injury and Non-serious incidents. No Injury and Non-serious incidents were most likely to occur in High security units, and Serious incidents were most likely to occur in Low Medium units. There was no relationship between the unit security classification of units that housed remand prisoners and incident severity. The units in which Non-Serious incidents occurred had the

⁸ We conducted post-hoc analyses to examine the relationship between ethnicity and incident severity. A multinomial regression, showed that there was a significant relationship between ethnicity and incident severity; however, this relationship was no longer significant in the presence of additional covariates (i.e., security classification, gang affiliation, custody type and being in directed segregation).

highest average rate of prisoner turnover, followed by units where No Injury incidents occurred; units in which Serious incidents occurred had the lowest average rate of turnover.

Comparisons Between Men Who Assaulted Staff and the Total Population

Table 2 depicts the characteristics of the total population of prisoners with no staff assault incident record in comparison to the perpetrators of staff assault. There was a significant difference between the two groups in their age, ethnicity, gang affiliation proportion, security classification and adjudication status. Notably, only 13.4% of the total population were gang-affiliated, compared to almost half of the staff-assault perpetrators. The total population tended to have lower security classifications than staff assault perpetrators at the time of their assault. The total population were also older than staff-assault perpetrators; prisoners in the 20-24 year old age band were particularly overrepresented as staff assault perpetrators compared to their proportion in the total population.

We conducted three binary logistic regressions to examine which prisoner characteristics, if any, were predictive of a prisoner perpetrating each category of severity of physical assault against a corrections officer (Tables 3, 4 and 5). We found that each overall model for No Injury and Non-serious incidents respectively was significant, but the model for Serious incidents was not significant. The security classification of the prisoner significantly predicted perpetration of a No Injury or a Non-serious physical assault against a corrections officer. Compared to unclassified prisoners (e.g., prisoners on remand) prisoners who were classified as being at minimum, low medium and high security were more likely to perpetrate No Injury incidents. Compared to unclassified prisoners, prisoners who were minimum, low, low medium, and high security were more likely to perpetrate Non-Serious incidents.

Table 2*Comparisons Between Perpetrators of Staff Assault and Non-perpetrators of Staff Assault*

	Staff assault perpetrators (n = 1087)		Non-perpetrators of staff assault (n = 32971)		F	p	df
Variable	M	SD	M	SD			
Age	29.66	9.36	34.73	11.81	196.19	<.001	1
Roc*RoI	.61	.23	.37	.24	985.61	<.001	1
Variable	n	%	n	%	χ^2	p	
Ethnicity of perpetrator					128.22	<.001	4
Māori	665	61.2	16549	50.2			
European	211	19.4	10805	32.8			
Pasifika	172	15.8	3611	11.0			
Other	25	2.3	1756	5.3			
Not recorded	14	1.3	239	0.7			
Gang Affiliated	522	48.0	4427	13.4	1014.07	<.001	1
Security Classification					1605.55	<.001	5
Minimum	26	2.4	4155	12.6			
Low	49	4.5	3965	12.0			
Low medium	130	12.0	3521	10.7			
High	245	22.5	2155	6.5			
Maximum	64	5.9	4155	0.1			
Remand/Unclassified	573	52.7	19129	58.0			
Adjudication status					18.71	<.001	2
Sentenced	545	50.1	14354	43.5			
Remand accused	377	34.7	13051	39.6			
Remand convicted	165	15.2	5566	16.9			
Age of perpetrator					211.25	<.001	7
<20	86	7.9	1643	5.0			
20 – 24	293	27.0	5113	15.5			
25 – 29	261	24.0	6469	19.6			
30 – 39	287	26.4	9591	29.1			
40 – 49	111	10.2	6122	18.6			
50 – 59	40	3.7	2841	8.6			
60+	9	0.8	1161	3.5			

Table 3

Binary Logistic Regression Using Prisoner Characteristics to Predict Perpetration of No Injury Physical Assault Against Corrections Officers

Prisoner characteristics	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Age category					
Under 20			8.55	6	.200
20 – 24	0.20	0.22	0.83	1	.363
25 – 29	0.14	0.22	0.42	1	.518
30 – 39	0.24	0.22	1.23	1	.267
40 – 49	-0.08	0.26	0.09	1	.770
50 – 59	0.86	0.37	5.42	1	.020
60 and over	0.50	0.71	0.49	1	.485
Security classification					
Unclassified			24.80	5	<.001
High	1.04	0.32	10.38	1	.001
Low	0.77	0.42	3.39	1	.066
Low Medium	1.07	0.35	9.30	1	.002
Maximum	0.29	0.34	0.72	1	.395
Minimum	1.13	0.54	4.46	1	.035
Ethnicity					
European			6.82	4	.145
Māori	0.04	0.14	0.09	1	.768
Other	-0.68	0.36	3.70	1	.054
Pacific Peoples	0.13	0.18	0.50	1	.479
Custody status	-0.29	0.31	0.86	1	.354
Gang affiliation	-0.15	0.12	1.59	1	.207
Model			$R^2 = .06; \chi^2(17) = 71.48, p < .001$		

Note. All R^2 are Nagelkerke. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Table 4

Binary Logistic Regression Using Prisoner Characteristics to Predict Perpetration of Non-Serious Physical Assault Against Corrections Officers

Prisoner characteristics	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Age category					
Under 20			6.70	6	.349
20 – 24	-0.15	0.22	0.46	1	.496
25 – 29	-0.10	0.22	0.21	1	.649
30 – 39	-0.22	0.22	0.97	1	.326
40 – 49	0.04	0.26	0.02	1	.879
50 – 59	-0.81	0.38	4.56	1	.033
60 and over	-0.40	0.71	0.31	1	.579
Security classification					
Unclassified			27.42	5	<.001
High	-1.18	0.33	13.21	1	<.001
Low	-1.00	0.43	5.47	1	.019
Low Medium	-1.25	0.36	12.41	1	<.001
Maximum	-0.42	0.34	1.51	1	.219
Minimum	-1.14	0.54	4.49	1	.034
Ethnicity					
European			5.73	4	.220
Māori	-0.11	0.14	0.60	1	.438
Other	0.32	0.35	0.80	1	.371
Pacific Peoples	-0.24	0.19	1.62	1	.203
Custody status	0.42	0.31	1.82	1	.177
Gang affiliation	0.09	0.12	0.54	1	.462
Model			$R^2 = .06; \chi^2(17) = 69.85, p < .001$		

Note. All R^2 are Nagelkerke. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Table 5

Binary Logistic Regression Using Prisoner Characteristics to Predict Perpetration of Serious Physical Assault Against Corrections Officers

Prisoner characteristics	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Age category					
Under 20			2.09	6	.911
20 – 24	-0.35	0.53	0.43	1	.511
25 – 29	-0.28	0.55	0.27	1	.607
30 – 39	-0.19	0.55	0.12	1	.726
40 – 49	0.29	0.64	0.21	1	.650
50 – 59	-0.71	1.13	0.39	1	.532
60 and over	-17.30	10986.24	0.00	1	.999
Security classification					
Unclassified			1.98	5	.852
High	1.40	1.34	1.10	1	.295
Low	1.95	1.47	1.78	1	.182
Low Medium	1.64	1.40	1.38	1	.240
Maximum	1.56	1.40	1.24	1	.266
Minimum	-16.12	7377.80	0.00	1	.998
Ethnicity					
European			8.20	4	.084
Māori	0.71	0.50	2.00	1	.158
Other	1.98	0.70	7.93	1	.005
Pacific Peoples	0.89	0.57	2.42	1	.120
Custody status	-1.57	1.33	1.39	1	.238
Gang affiliation	0.46	0.32	2.02	1	.156
Model			$R^2 = .05; \chi^2(17) = 18.69, p < .346$		

Note. All R^2 are Nagelkerke. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Finally, we compared the average rate of turnover of prisoners across units in New Zealand prisons where a staff assault did not occur ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.14$), with the turnover rates of units in which a prisoner assaulted a staff member. We found that the average rate of turnover of prisoners in units where a staff assault did not occur was significantly lower than units where No Injury and Non-Serious incidents occurred: $t(9813) = 11.68$, $p < .001$; $t(9502) = 19.10$, $p < .001$). Units where a Serious incident occurred had lower rates of turnover of prisoners than the average rate of turnover for units in New Zealand prisons; however they were not significantly different ($t(9214) = 0.27$, $p = 0.790$). We then examined whether rates of turnover differed depending on the security classification of the unit, and found that high security units had the highest rates of turnover compared to units of other security classifications (i.e., minimum, low medium, or maximum security units). These findings were consistent across units that housed sentenced prisoners ($F(4) = 81.59$, $p < .001$) and also in units that housed remand prisoners ($F(3) = 175.18$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

There is limited research that examines whether the characteristics of prisoners who perpetrate staff assault differ by the level of seriousness of the incident. To address this gap, we analysed a centralised database of physical assault incidents to address three aims to: (a) describe the characteristic of assault incidents and their perpetrators, (b) examine their similarities and differences across three levels of assault severity, and (c) compare the characteristics of assault perpetrators with the remainder of the prison population. We also compared rates of turnover of prisoners in units where physical incidents occurred with the average rate for prisoners in any unit in a New Zealand prison.

Perpetrator and Environmental Characteristics

We found that perpetrators of staff assault were most likely to be Māori (i.e., indigenous New Zealanders), a majority were gang affiliated, and most were classified as

high security. These findings are consistent with previous research that characterises perpetrators of staff assault as having a minority ethnic identity and being gang affiliated (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Sorensen et al., 2011; Worrall & Morris, 2012).

The most common time of day for corrections officers to be physically assaulted by a prisoner was between 8am and 12pm, which was somewhat consistent with previous research (Sorensen et al., 2011), and most incidents occurred in private locations (i.e., in and around cells). Activities centred around cells (i.e., unlocking or locking prisoners cells and giving prisoners food, water, or medication) increase the risk that staff will be physically assaulted; prisoners may pull staff into their cells or assault them in the doorway as staff unlock the door. However, these risky activities are integral parts of daily routines within prisons (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; McNeeley, 2022). As per the regime of the prison, staff complete these activities daily at specific times, and prisoners can predict when they will be able to interact with corrections officers. This knowledge provides an opportunity for prisoners to prepare themselves to assault a corrections officer at these key times and places, if they are motivated to do so (Light, 1991).

Perpetrators in Directed Segregation Committed More Serious Assaults

Perpetrators of Serious incidents were more than twice as likely to be in Directed Segregation (DS) prior to the incident, compared to perpetrators of no injury incidents. In our sample, around one third of perpetrators of staff assault were housed in DS prior to perpetrating an incident. However, more than two-thirds of Serious assaults were in DS, meaning that staff assaulted in these settings are much more likely to suffer serious injuries than those assaulted elsewhere. This finding may seem surprising given that prisoners are often moved to DS because they have been judged to be at increased risk of harming others, being in DS limits the opportunities they have to commit assaults, and staff are aware and prepared for the heightened risk of harm in DS. But on the other hand, the restricted nature

of DS (i.e., having no access to programmes or other structured activities, or conversation with other prisoners, and minimal time outside of their cells) means prisoners only social interaction may be with staff. As a result, people in DS may feel especially frustrated at their living situation, may feel like they have nothing to lose, or may simply be bored. Taken together, the history of serious violence that leads prisoners to be housed in DS and the restricted nature of DS may come together to increase the risk of violence towards staff during the periods where they are interacting.

For incidents that occurred in private locations, we found that there was a complex relationship between the prisoner turnover in the unit, the security classification of the unit, and the severity of incidents that occurred in a unit. We found that across units, assaults most commonly occurred in the high security units and that high security units had higher rates of turnover compared to units with other security levels (i.e., minimum, low medium and maximum security units). Taken together, these findings may demonstrate the complexity of managing high security prisoners in a high security environment. Units with high turnover appear to have experienced a relatively high volume of minor assaults, perhaps because in high turnover units, greater unfamiliarity with the other prisoners and staff creates more tension or frustration. This suggestion would be consistent with previous research where high rates of turnover have been associated with unstable and tense environments in prison (Baggio et al., 2018; Baggio et al., 2020). Although assaulting staff may lead to an increase in security classification that may cause turnover as prisoners are moved to higher security units, staff assaults are relatively infrequent compared to prisoner movements for other reasons. (e.g., where beds are available, and adjustments to gang membership distributions in unit, or moving prisoners who cannot associate with each other). On the other hand, we found that a disproportionate number of Serious incidents (compared to less serious incidents) occurred in units that housed sentenced low medium prisoners, and in units with the most

stable populations (i.e., units with low rates of turnover). With the information we had available for this study, we cannot be clear about potential causes for this unexpected pattern. Further investigation is needed.

Perpetrators of Staff Assault Differed from the Total Prison Population

Consistent with previous research, we found that perpetrators of violence towards corrections officers tended to be younger than prisoners who did not perpetrate violence against corrections officers (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; Cunningham et al., 2005; Lahm, 2009). The age of perpetrators is one of the most common predictors of prisoner-to-corrections officer violence (Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Younger prisoners may have more difficulty with emotional regulation, they may be trying to prove themselves among their peers, and they may be more aggressive in general compared to older prisoners (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012). Younger prisoners may also be prospecting for gangs and are tasked with committing violence on behalf of the gang (NZPA, 2021).

We found that people who were already gang affiliated were more likely to be perpetrators of assault against corrections officers than prisoners unaffiliated to gangs, which aligns with previous research that gang members typically have higher levels of misconduct in prison (Brabyn et al., 2023; Pyrooz et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2024; Worrall & Morris, 2012). We found that half of people who assaulted staff were affiliated with a gang, compared to one quarter of the total prison population. Gang affiliation is a risk characteristic for being involved in prison violence in general – it is commonly observed that gang members contribute to the majority of violence in prison, despite being a minority population (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2020). Gang members as individuals typically regard themselves as responsible for maintaining the collective status of the gang, whether they are instructed to do so or not (Brennan-Tupara, 2022; Bubolz & Lee, 2017; Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012). They use violence to punish perceived disrespect, and express anger and frustration. If a gang lets an

insult go publicly unpunished, their reputation may suffer and they may lose standing in a competitive environment. Although these dynamics are established as sources of violence toward other prisoners (Brennan-Tupara, 2022), we speculate that a gang member who feels unfairly treated by staff or perceives a staff member as disrespectful, may also be more likely to use violence to communicate frustration or to punish the staff member compared to non-gang members.

It was not surprising that staff-assault perpetrators typically held higher security classifications or were housed in higher security environments prior to their assaults than prisoners in the total population, given that security status is related to the level of risk a prisoner is thought to pose toward others, and higher security environments are probably also more frustrating and stressful for prisoners and staff. We also found that a higher proportion of staff-assault perpetrators were on remand (i.e., awaiting trial or sentencing at the time of the incident) compared to the total population. In New Zealand, 44% of prisoners are on remand, and one in five is released back into the community at sentencing, because they are judged to already have spent longer in prison than the crime warranted (RNZ, 2022). Men on remand do not have a security classification, so therefore people who may eventually be classified as high risk are housed together with people who pose a low risk to others. Remand units also often have little or no access to constructive activities such as education or rehabilitation in which prisoners can engage. Men on remand may be bored, and are often locked in their cells for up to 19 hours a day (Russell, 2020). Anecdotally some men have told us that they set up aggressive interactions with other prisoners to keep themselves occupied. Finally, remand units are highly stressful environments; men on remand often feel anxious about their uncertain future, legal situation and limited contact with their families (Hatton, 2023). It seems plausible that this combination of factors all interact to produce a tense environment where violence may occur all too frequently.

Implications

Our findings are relevant for organisational safety; identifying characteristics of people and places that may be riskier for physically assaulting corrections staff (e.g., younger prisoners, prisoners who are gang affiliated, directed segregation) may have implications for corrections officers when completing their daily tasks. For example, when staff complete tasks that are themselves risky in terms of assault (e.g., moving prisoners; Sorensen, 2011), an awareness that prisoners being younger or gang affiliated may compound this risk may enable staff may to take extra precautions in these situations. These precautions may include assessing the demeanour of the prisoner before unlocking them, or ensuring they have adequate physical measures (e.g., adequate staff) to restrain the prisoner if necessary. It is important to note that these risky activities are part of the daily regime of tasks that must be completed by staff, making it impossible to completely mitigate the risk in these necessary activities. Nevertheless, increasing staff situational awareness may be helpful for mitigating risk more generally. Recent US research indicated that correctional staff saw the potential for injury as coming from a mix of causes they could and could not control. Staff regarded complacency as a potential cause of injuries (Goulette et al., 2022); situational awareness—the antithesis of complacency—may, at the least, give staff an increased sense of control over some circumstances that may be leading to an assault.

We found that the sample of men in this study who physically assaulted corrections officers differed from the rest of the prisoner population who did not assault corrections officers and from general population of New Zealand as a whole. New Zealand has a diverse general population with 17.2% identifying as indigenous Māori and with 9% identifying as Pasifika. However, the New Zealand prison population is less diverse, which is reflected in the nature of our sample. About half of all prisoners are Māori and 16% are Pasifika; which means that New Zealand prisons are confronted with the importance of addressing the

consequences of colonization and the complex needs associated with the disproportionate imprisonment of Māori (Department of Corrections, 2007). We believe our findings may be applicable to nations with similar histories of colonization, namely Australia and Canada, with the intention of building an understanding of why Indigenous people in prison may be at higher risk of physically assaulting corrections staff.

Limitations

The inclusion of some variables (i.e., age of perpetrator, gang affiliation) in our sample may further explain the finding that Māori people perpetrated more serious violence against staff in prison. We know that age and gang affiliation are predictive of violence perpetration both inside of and outside of prison, and we found that younger prisoners and gang affiliated prisoners were more likely to perpetrate serious physical assault against a corrections officer. To address this issue, we conducted post-hoc analyses that revealed that Māori people in our sample were significantly younger ($F(1) = 43.00, p = <.001$) and significantly more likely to be gang affiliated ($\chi^2(1) = 129.91.21, p = <.001$) compared to non-Māori people. It is important to acknowledge this limitation of the measurements used in our manuscript, that ‘being Māori’ can be viewed as proxy for other variables predictive of assault that Māori are more likely to have. This is not to say that we should ignore ethnicity as a predictor, but rather that the focus may be better placed on seeking to understand and remediate the factors—particularly those associated with the long-reaching effects of colonization—that lead to Māori being overrepresented or having higher levels of predictors both of imprisonment and of serious staff assault.

In this study, we used data from a centralised database that contained information about incidents of physical assault that occurred in New Zealand prisons. These data are limited; there was no information about the victim of the incident (aside from the fact that they were a corrections officer), and key contextual information surrounding the incident

(e.g., triggers that preceeded the assault, where the assault occurred, the sequencing of events after the assault began) was also not included. Therefore we had limited ability to compare the characteristics of those assaulted by NZ prisoners with previous research in other jurisdictions: information that can be helpful in developing prevention strategies that make staff and prisoners safer. It is also important to note that the incidents recorded in the centralised database are reported by corrections staff; therefore we are also missing key information from assault perpetrators that might also inform prevention.

Future Directions

The limitations of our research suggest the need for examining more detailed data about physical assault incidents perpetrated by prisoners towards corrections officers. We plan to examine staff incident reports of physical assaults, because these may provide more detailed data and include contextual information about the incident (i.e., precursors to the incident, the sequencing of events during the incident). Following an incident, staff must provide a written account of their perspective of the incident and their role in the incident. Although these data also have the limitation of being only from a staff perspective, analysis of the narrative content of incident reports will shed additional light on some of the content missing from this analysis. In addition to understanding *how* incidents occur, using incident reports we may be able to examine how staff respond to physical incidents. As a result, we may be able to get an understanding of what measures staff take to keep themselves and their colleagues safe in the workplace. It may also be valuable to consider other avenues of data that provide more context on prisoner to staff physical assaults. Interviewing corrections staff or even prisoners could lend insight into why assaults occur in the first place and provide a more nuanced perspective of prisoner to corrections staff assault.

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Chapter Three: A narrative analysis of incident reports to examine the similarities and differences of prisoner-to-officer assault across three levels of severity

Being assaulted is a frightening experience; many victims purposely avoid situations where they may be violently victimised again. But what happens when the victim of a violent assault cannot avoid their perpetrator, or worse still, what if their daily routine *requires* them to interact with their perpetrator? For corrections officers who are physically assaulted by a prisoner, being a victim of violence is complex. There are particular activities, times and locations in prisons that increase the risk of prisoners physically assaulting officers; however, less is known about how these incidents unfold, and whether how incidents unfold contribute to more harmful assaults against officers. To address this gap, this research examined written narratives from corrections officers' routine incident reports. We used reports of prisoner to corrections officer physical assault to examine the characteristics of incidents and of victims, and explored whether these characteristics were associated with incidents of different severities.

Violence Against Corrections Officers

Corrections officers are more likely to be victims of violence at work compared to those in other occupations (i.e., largely attributed to assaults by prisoners; Upson, 2003; Wolff et al., 2007). Protective service employees (e.g., corrections officers, police officers) are 14 times more likely to be physically assaulted compared to people working in other fields (e.g., teachers, taxi drivers, health care professionals; Upson, 2003). Corrections officers report high levels of both physical (e.g., injury, illness from contamination of bodily fluids) and emotional (e.g., fear, stress, depression and anxiety symptoms) consequences following violent victimization. In the U.S, corrections officers sustain the second highest rate of nonfatal injuries in the workplace (after police officers; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Konda et al., 2013) and they sustain the highest rate of injuries inflicted by another person at

work (147.50 per 10,000 employees; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). These injuries were mostly sustained during interactions with prisoners (e.g., physical assault, breaking up fights between prisoners) and were most commonly bruises and contusions, followed by cuts and lacerations, then fractures (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Corrections officers also experience high levels of emotional consequences from being physically assaulted (e.g., fear, stress) and report high levels of symptoms of depression, symptoms of anxiety and high rates of PTSD (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Fusco et al., 2021; Jaegers, 2020; Kinman et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2010; Spinaris et al., 2012; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015).

Rates of physical assault by prisoners towards corrections officers may differ depending on characteristics of the officers themselves, such as their gender or their role as a corrections officer. In a U.S study that examined data collected in 45 prisons, corrections officers who had contact with a higher number of prisoners (on average per shift) had higher odds of being physically assaulted compared to officers who had contact with fewer prisoners (e.g., officers working in a unit compared to officers in the control booth; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Officer gender may also be associated with the risk of being assaulted; men are more likely to be a victim of prisoner violence than women (Konda et al., 2013; Sorensen et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Compared to women, men who work in prison report a lower perceived risk of victimization but have a higher actual risk of being assaulted by a prisoner (Gordan et al., 2003; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020).

Why do Prisoners Assault Corrections Officers?

Why prisoners assault corrections officers has been widely discussed by researchers. Previous research suggests that there are two types of aggression: reactive aggression (i.e., in response to frustration; Bandura, 1973) and proactive aggression (i.e., violence used purposefully; Berkowitz, 1993; Cornell et al., 1996). Reactive aggression (i.e., 'hostile' violence) is understood as 'emotional' aggression that occurs in response to frustration, while

proactive aggression (i.e., ‘instrumental’ violence) is purposeful and is motivated by achieving a goal (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993; Cornell et al., 1996). The intersection between reactive and proactive aggression has been termed the ‘hostile versus instrumental’ dichotomy of aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Although this dichotomy has been criticised as being simplistic (e.g., it excludes violence based on multiple motives; Bushman & Anderson, 2001), we suggest that the dichotomy could lend insight into prisoners’ motivations for assaulting corrections officers.

Reactive Violence

Some researchers suggest that people use violence in response to the strains they experience (i.e., general strain theory; Agnew, 1992). Because prisoners experience high levels of strain as a product of the environment they live in, general strain theory may be applicable and may align with deprivation theory (a theory of prison violence widely discussed in correctional research; Sykes, 1958). Deprivation theory suggests that prisoners use violence to express their frustrations in response to the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (e.g., the loss of personal autonomy, the loss of access to goods and services; Sykes, 1958). Closely related, general strain theory (GST) suggests that people may use violence in response to the removal of positively valued stimuli (e.g., personal autonomy, access to goods and services; Agnew, 1992; Blevins et al., 2010). However, GST expands the scope of deprivation theory by suggesting that people also use violence in response to being prevented from achieving their goals or to alleviate the presentation of noxious stimuli (Agnew, 1992). These facets of strain theory may be present in a prison environment (Blevins et al., 2010). In particular, some activities or behaviours of officers may represent facets of strain; for example, when officers deny prisoners’ requests, officers are preventing prisoners from achieving their goals or it may serve as a reminder of the removal of positively valued stimuli (e.g., officers not allowing prisoners phone calls, denying property requests). In a U.S. study that examined the

sources of violence against corrections officers, prisoners commonly targetted corrections officers for violence when officers gave them orders or when officers denied their requests (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Similarly, a Canadian study that examined how corrections officers communicate with prisoners found that prisoners may use violence against officers when officers assert their authority over prisoners by enforcing rules or disciplining prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016).

Instrumental Violence

On the other hand, other researchers suggest that people use violence purposefully and that offenders rationally decide to use violence to achieve goals (i.e., Rational Choice Theory; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Rational Choice Theory (RCT; Cornish & Clarke, 1986) posits that people make decisions by weighing the costs and rewards of actions, then choose the option that will best achieve their desired outcome (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). In a correctional context, prisoners may assault officers to seek status among their peers and gain notoriety (Rodriguez et al., 2024), they may want to move to a more secure unit to reinforce their notoriety (i.e., some prisoners may consider themselves a ‘maximum security prisoner’ and may not want to live in lower security units), or they may want to move to a safer environment where contact with other prisoners is limited, and assaulting an officer will achieve that aim (e.g., special housing units, administrative segregation; Goulette et al., 2022; Light, 1991).

When and Where do Prisoners Assault Corrections Officers?

As corrections officers complete their daily duties, there are activities that may cause tension between them and prisoners, described in prior research as “rubbing-points of the prison’s social order” (Bottoms, 1999, p. 265). These rubbing points include when officers give orders that prisoners may be opposed to (e.g., to return to their cell for lockup) or when officers deny prisoner requests (e.g., phone calls, property requests; Bottoms, 1999; Light,

1991; McNeeley, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). Officers may also be particularly vulnerable while they conduct person or cell searches (Bottoms, 1999; Light, 1991; McNeeley, 2021). Person searches are physically intrusive and may be especially difficult for trauma survivors (e.g., by triggering flashbacks). Cell searches may be risky if prisoners are concealing contraband (and become agitated that officers may discover it), if officers find contraband (and charge prisoners for having it), or if officers conduct the search disrespectfully by creating disarray in the prisoner's cell. Another rubbing point between officers and prisoners is during movements (i.e., when officers move prisoners internally to other parts of the prison or externally when required, such as to attend court; Bottoms, 1999; Light, 1991; McNeeley, 2021). Movements may be risky times for prisoners to assault corrections officers depending on whether the prisoner objects to the movement (e.g., being moved to a different unit that they don't want to move to) or if the movement occurs after distressing events (e.g., returning from court after receiving a disappointing outcome).

Prisoners may also assault officers depending on the level of contact they have with officers and the predictability of that contact. In a study that examined the safety risks of jail officers, officers who routinely had more contact with prisoners had higher odds of being physically assaulted (Ellison & Gainey, 2020). Unlocking prisoners from their cells is an example of a routine activity that occurs at a predictable time every day and is associated with high rates of physical assault against officers by prisoners (Bottoms, 1999; Sparks et al., 1996). Prisoners may take advantage of morning unlock being a predictable opportunity when they have contact with officers, and assault the officer who unlocks them.

Previous research has identified that most violence against officers occurs in or around prisoners' cells, aligning with the findings that unlocking prisoners from their cell is a risky activity (Bottoms, 1999; McNeeley, 2021; McNeeley & Donley, 2021; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). Corridors and common areas

(e.g., the exercise yard, recreation areas) are also risky locations for prisoners to assault officers, agreeing with the findings that movements are a risky time for violence to occur (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011).

Prisoner and Officer Actions During Incidents of Violence

Compared to research that examines why, when and where prisoners assault corrections officers, less is known about *how* prisoners assault officers. A U.S. study that identified situational risk factors of prisoner to officer assault found that the most common method used by prisoners to assault officers was by throwing bodily fluids at them (e.g., saliva), followed by striking officers, then grabbing officers (McNeeley, 2021). This finding was supported by a different U.S. study that found prisoners used bodily fluids against officers in 15.9% of incidents (e.g., feces, urine, saliva, blood; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023) and in more than half of incidents prisoners only used their body to assault officers and did not use a weapon. Although these studies identify the different types of actions prisoners may use to assault officers, they did not examine whether different types of actions produced more serious injuries to officers.

In New Zealand, corrections officers have a range of actions they may use to respond to physical violence. Officers are primarily encouraged to use verbal de-escalation techniques to resolve incidents, but may use physical force (e.g., control and restraint techniques) in situations where it's likely a person will cause harm to themselves or others, and officers have "exhausted every effort to defuse a situation peacefully without the need for force" (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c). Officers may use reasonable force that is proportionate to the severity of the incident, which includes the use of pepper spray in serious incidents (Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005). Previous research acknowledges that it may be more effective for officers to use communication to de-escalate situations, however, also reports that officers used physical force to respond to almost one fifth of incidents and

used chemical irritants (i.e., pepper spray) in around 4% of incidents (McNeeley & Donley, 2021). Moreover, a similar study found that when officers used physical force against prisoners during incidents, it reduced the likelihood that the prisoner would successfully make physical contact with the officer, therefore reducing the harm caused to officers (McNeeley, 2021).

Severity of Assault

Some previous research has categorized the severity of prisoner violence against corrections officers depending on the level of physical injury sustained by the victim (Light, 1991; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). These studies found a common pattern: most victims sustained no injuries, fewer victims sustained minor or moderate injuries (e.g., scratches, bruises) and very few victims sustained serious injuries (e.g., unconsciousness, significant loss of blood, life-threatening injuries; Light, 1991; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011). This previous research has generally not examined whether characteristics of the assault (e.g., the location, the activities occurring prior to the assault, method of assault used by the prisoner) contributed to the severity of the assault (i.e., the severity of the physical injuries sustained by the victim). By understanding whether characteristics of incidents contribute to more serious harm for victims, we may identify when corrections officers are at the most risk of being seriously injured by a prisoner.

Current Study

There may be situations (e.g., locations, activities) that are riskier for corrections officers to be physically assaulted by prisoners. Although these situations may lend insight into when and where incidents occur, less is known about *how* prisoners use violence against corrections officers and how officers respond to violence. Less is also known about whether different characteristics of incidents contribute to more serious assaults. Using data from New Zealand's national prison incident database, we aimed to a) describe characteristics of victims

of prisoner to officer assault, b) describe characteristics of the incidents themselves, and c) examine the similarities and differences of victim and incident characteristics across three levels of severity. Consistent with previous research, we expect that victims will primarily be men in roles that require regular interaction with prisoners. Although there is limited research that examines the severity of physical violence against officers, we expect that incidents will be more serious when prisoners have greater opportunity to use close-contact actions (i.e., punching and kicking, compared to throwing objects at officers) to assault officers. Finally, consistent with legislation, we expect that as the severity of the incident increases, so will the actions officers use to de-escalate incidents (e.g., physical force, pepper spray).

Method

Data Source

Across 18 prisons in New Zealand, more than 4,000 corrections officers manage more than 9,000 prisoners (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024a). As corrections officers interact with prisoners throughout their shifts, they document prisoner behavior by writing incident reports. Incident reports detail occurrences in prison ranging from routine (e.g., a prisoner having a medical appointment) to serious behavioral infractions (e.g., a prisoner assaulting an officer). Incident reports include a narrative account by officers involved in the incident where they describe the incident and their role in it⁹; reports also include administrative fields such as the time the incident occurred, the location the incident occurred in, and the severity of the incident. Staff categorise the severity of the incident based on a reporting guideline provided by Ara Poutama Aotearoa which evaluates and categorises the severity of the victim's injuries into three levels (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2022): 'No Injury' (i.e., the victim

⁹There are typically multiple incident reports for one incident because multiple officers are usually involved (i.e., in addition to the victim, each officer who responds to the incident must also write an incident report regardless of how minor their role was). We compiled all reports for each incident and included all reports in the dataset. If there were discrepancies between reports for an incident, we deferred to the victim's perspective of the incident.

did not sustain any injuries or require medical treatment), ‘Non-serious’ (i.e., the victim sustained injuries that required initial medical treatment but not on-going treatment) or ‘Serious’ (i.e., victim sustained serious bodily harm that required overnight hospitalization or extended periods of ongoing medical intervention). From an initial dataset of 1647 incidents of physical assault perpetrated by an individual male prisoner against a corrections staff member in New Zealand prisons between 2016 and 2020, we extracted a subsample of 159 incident reports for more detailed analysis. The original dataset contained 53 Serious incidents of physical assault. Our subsample included all 53 of these incidents, and we randomly selected 53 each of No Injury and Non-Serious incidents in the same timeframe to complete the dataset used here for analysis ($n = 159$). Because we were primarily focused on the safety of corrections officers, we excluded six incidents that were not perpetrated against an officer but a corrections staff member of a different role (e.g., nurses, tutors). Because we were interested in physical violence, we excluded one incident where the prisoner did not physically assault the officer (i.e., the incident had been incorrectly categorised as officer assault) and one incident where the prisoner sexually assaulted an officer. Our final dataset included 151 incidents of physical assault by an individual prisoner against corrections officers.

Procedure

We read each incident report, identified salient characteristics and recorded whether each characteristic was present in each incident report. These characteristics included victim (e.g., gender, role type) and incident (e.g., aggressive actions used by the prisoner, the location where the incident occurred, how officers responded to the incident) variables. The first and third authors conducted several joint rounds of initial coding to refine the coding criteria. We then independently coded 20% of the dataset—cases not used in the development of the criteria—to determine a level of agreement between coders based on our final variable

definitions. Disagreements in rating were resolved by discussion. For all variables coded the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) ranged between .642 and 1, which indicates moderate to excellent agreement (Koo & Li, 2015). Once we reached a satisfactory level of agreement, the first author coded the remaining cases.

Variables Coded

Victim Characteristics

Victim characteristics included the gender of the primary victim and their role type, and whether there was more than one victim harmed during the incident (i.e., ‘secondary victim’). We identified the primary victim of the incident by recording who the prisoner assaulted first. We dichotomously recorded whether a secondary victim was harmed during the incident, which included officers who were present prior to the incident beginning and officers who responded to the incident (i.e., officers who came to the aid of their colleague). We coded victim gender by recording the pronouns used in the incident reports (e.g., “she”, “him”); if neutral pronouns were used we recorded the gender of the victim as ‘not recorded’. We coded the role type of the victim into three categories: corrections officer, senior corrections officer, or supervisor/principal corrections officer. In incident reports, the majority of victims stated their role (e.g., “I was rostered on as a corrections officer in unit A”) or their role was described by another officer (e.g., “The prisoner assaulted senior corrections officer Smith”). If the victim was referred to as simply an “officer” we coded their role type as ‘corrections officer’. We included the victim’s role type even if they were ‘acting’ in the role (i.e., temporarily covering that role in place of another officer). We coded victims as ‘supervisor/principal corrections officer’ if they held a middle management position where they were not in consistent contact with prisoners (i.e., their role was also administrative or compliance based).

Incident Characteristics

To capture the context of the incident, we coded factors that may have contributed to the incident occurring (i.e., ‘contributing factors’) and the location of the incident (i.e., ‘environmental context’). Contributing factors included interactions between officers and prisoners that prisoners may have reacted poorly to (e.g., being denied something, the officer reprimanding the prisoner, lock up) and interactions where prisoners took opportunities to assault officers (e.g., unlock/hatch related violence). If incident reports explicitly included prisoners’ reasoning for their use of violence (i.e., they used violence for a specific purpose) we coded the contributing factor as ‘goal motivated’. We coded the contributing factor as ‘other’ for incidents where the incident report included no contributing factors (i.e., the incident “came out of nowhere”) or the contributing factor did not better fit a different category (e.g., officers breaking up prisoners fighting). The environmental context variable captured where the incident occurred (e.g., prisoner cells, recreational areas) or specific activities that were occurring at the time of the incident (e.g., movements, medical assessments, officers dispensing food or medication). We coded all incidents that occurred in the dayroom, compound, and exercise yard as ‘recreational area’.

Prisoner Actions

We coded actions the prisoner used to assault the officer (i.e., ‘aggressive actions’) and how many types of actions the prisoner used in each incident. We also dichotomously coded whether the prisoner was verbally abusive prior to or during the incident (i.e., ‘verbal abuse’). Many aggressive actions were low frequency, therefore we combined aggressive actions that were similar. To our knowledge, there is limited previous research that combines different types of aggressive actions according to the potential harm they may cause. Therefore, we combined some values guided by the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-R; Straus et al., 1996). We collapsed pushing, grabbing, and slapping into the variable ‘minor violence’ and we collapsed kicking, punching and elbowing into the variable ‘severe

violence' (Straus et al., 1996). We did not collapse the remaining values because they were variables that had different implications in prison compared to general violence (i.e., 'biological violence', 'using weapons', 'objects/liquid thrown') or they were simply relevant only in a prison environment (i.e., 'prison specific'). 'Biological' violence captured when officers were exposed to prisoners' bodily fluids (i.e., when prisoners bit or spat at officers), which could seriously harm officers by potentially exposing them to infectious diseases. 'Using weapons' was included in the CTS-R, however, we did not categorize them according to the CTS-R because weapons in prison differ from weapons used in intimate partner violence (i.e., weapons in prisons are crafted by prisoners, compared to a person using a gun in intimate partner violence incidents). 'Prison specific' aggressive actions captured incidents where the prisoner used the hatch in their cell door to assault an officer. Note that we recorded *all* types of aggressive actions that the prisoner used during the incident and many incidents had more than one aggressive action used, therefore the number of aggressive actions outnumbered the number of incidents in the dataset.

Officer Actions

We also coded how corrections officers responded to incidents of violence. When officers write incident reports they also record whether they used pepper spray, handcuffs, or physical force during the incident. We created variables for each officer action and dichotomously recorded whether they appeared in each incident report.

Analytic Plan

First, we calculated descriptive statistics of the victim and incident characteristics for the total sample of incidents, and also by incident severity. We then conducted bivariate analyses to examine the differences between victim and incident characteristics across three levels of severity. Finally, based on our findings we wanted to further explore whether there were associations between specific variables so we conducted post-hoc analyses between the

contributing factors for the incident and the environmental context of the incident. Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.

Results

Victim Characteristics

The victim's gender was recorded in three quarters of incidents. Shown in Table 1, of the victims whose gender was recorded in the incident report, most victims were men and fewer than 10% were women. Men were significantly overrepresented as victims of Serious incidents while women tended to be equally distributed across each level of severity. More than three quarters of victims were corrections officers, almost one fifth of victims were senior corrections officers and only 6% of victims were principal corrections officers or held supervisory roles. There was a secondary victim of more than a third of all incidents, and as incidents became more serious, the proportion of incidents with a secondary victim increased.

Incident Characteristics

An officer giving a prisoner an instruction contributed to a third of incidents occurring. Other factors that commonly contributed to incidents occurring were prisoners being unlocked from their cell or officers denying a prisoner something (e.g., a phonecall outside of recreation time, more time unlocked). There was no significant relationship between contributing factors and the severity of the incident. More than a third of incidents occurred inside or directly outside of a prisoner's cell, and almost a third occurred in recreational areas. There was a significant relationship between the environmental context of the incident and the severity of the incident. Serious and Non-serious incidents occurred most frequently around prisoners' cells, while No Injury incidents most frequently occurred in recreational areas. Incidents that occurred during movements were more likely to be Non-serious or Serious, compared to No Injury incidents.

Table 1*Victim and Incident Characteristics, by Total Incident Sample and Incident Severity Subsamples*

	Total sample (<i>n</i> = 151)		No Injury (<i>n</i> = 49)		Non-serious (<i>n</i> = 50)		Serious (<i>n</i> = 52)				
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Victim gender									.24	2	.889
Man	105	90.5	26	24.7	35	33.3	44	41.9			
Woman	11	9.5	2	18.2	4	36.4	5	45.5			
Victim role type									0.99	4	.939
Corrections officer	116	76.8	39	79.6	39	78.0	38	73.1			
Senior corrections officer	26	17.2	8	16.3	8	16.0	10	19.2			
Supervior/principal corrections officer	9	6.0	2	4.1	3	6.0	4	7.7			
Secondary victim	34	22.5	5	10.2	10	20.0	19	36.5	10.30	2	.006
Contributing factors									12.93	14	.522
Being denied something	19	12.6	9	18.4	6	12.0	4	7.7			
Goal motivated	4	2.6	1	2.0	1	2.0	2	3.8			
Lock up	10	6.6	2	4.1	5	10.0	3	5.8			
Officer instruction	50	33.1	13	26.5	22	44.0	15	28.8			
Officer reprimanding prisoner	10	6.6	3	6.1	3	6.0	4	7.7			
Other	27	17.9	9	18.4	6	12.0	12	23.1			
Previous incident	7	4.6	3	6.1	0	0.0	4	7.7			
Unlock/hatch related	24	15.9	9	18.4	7	14.0	8	15.4			
Environmental context									15.31	8	.044
Assessment/medical	8	5.3	2	4.1	4	8.0	2	3.8			
Cells	53	35.1	12	24.5	24	48.0	17	32.7			
Mealtimes/dispensing medication	14	9.3	7	14.3	4	8.0	3	5.8			
Movements	29	19.2	6	12.2	9	18.0	14	26.9			
Recreational areas	47	31.3	22	44.9	9	18.0	16	30.8			
Verbal abuse	73	48.3	18	36.7	31	62.0	24	46.2	6.48	2	.039

Aggressive actions											
Biological	11	7.3	4	8.2	5	10.0	2	3.8	1.51	2	.460
Minor violence	49	32.5	21	42.9	20	40.0	8	15.4	10.63	2	.005
Object/liquid thrown	30	19.9	16	32.7	11	22.0	3	5.8	11.67	2	.003
Prison specific	3	2.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	2	3.8	1.94	2	.380
Severe violence	80	53.0	15	30.6	21	42.0	44	84.6	33.15	2	<.001
Use of weapon	13	8.6	0	0.0	7	14.0	6	11.5	8.46	2	.013
Count of aggressive actions									8.67	4	.049
One	122	80.8	44	89.8	38	76.0	40	76.9			
Two	23	15.2	2	4.1	10	20.0	11	21.2			
Three	6	4.0	3	6.1	2	4.0	1	1.9			
Officer actions											
Use of handcuffs	81	53.6	20	40.8	24	48.0	37	71.2	10.29	2	.006
Use of pepper spray	12	7.9	0	0.0	1	2.0	11	21.2	16.89	2	<.001
Use of physical force	87	57.6	22	44.9	34	68.0	31	59.6	5.54	2	.063

Note. 'Officer actions' may add up to more than each sample because officers may use multiple actions in one incident (e.g., hand cuffs and pepper spray).

Table 2

Contributing Factors to Incidents by the Environmental Context where the Incident Occurred

Environmental context	Assessment/ medical		Cells		Recreational areas		Mealtimes/ medication		Movements		χ^2	df	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%			
Contributing factors											70.18	28	<.001
Being denied something	1	12.5	9	17.0	7	14.9	1	7.1	1	3.4			
Goal motivated	0	0.0	1	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	10.3			
Lock up	0	0.0	5	9.4	3	6.4	0	0.0	2	6.9			
Officer instruction	2	25.0	16	30.2	14	29.8	1	7.1	17	58.6			
Officer reprimanding prisoner	1	12.5	4	7.5	4	8.5	0	0.0	1	3.4			
Other	2	25.0	6	11.3	14	29.8	2	14.3	3	10.3			
Previous incident	0	0.0	2	3.8	4	8.5	0	0.0	1	3.4			
Unlock/hatch related	2	25.0	10	18.9	1	2.1	10	71.4	1	3.4			
Verbal abuse	5	62.5	30	41.1	27	57.4	2	14.3	9	31.0	13.63	4	.007

Prisoners verbally abused officers in almost half of incidents. There was a significant difference between the severity of the incident and whether the prisoner was verbally abusive; prisoners were verbally abusive in two thirds of Non-serious incidents, compared to almost half of Serious incidents and one third of No Injury incidents. In more than half of all incidents prisoners most commonly used severe violence to assault victims; in almost one third of incidents prisoners used minor violence to assault victims; and in almost one fifth of incidents prisoners threw objects or liquids at victims. There was a significant relationship between the severity of the incident and prisoners using minor violence against victims, prisoners throwing objects or liquid, prisoners using severe violence against victims, and prisoners using a weapon. In more than four fifths of Serious incidents prisoners used severe violence against victims, compared to two fifths of Non-serious incidents and less than a third of No Injury incidents. In more than two fifths of No Injury incidents prisoners used minor violence against victims and in almost a third of No Injury incidents prisoners threw objects or liquids at victims.

There was a significant relationship between the severity of the incident and the number of different types of aggressive actions prisoners used against victims during one incident. In almost 90% of No Injury incidents prisoners used only one type of aggressive action against victims, compared to around three quarters of Non-serious and Serious incidents. In around one fifth of both Non-serious and Serious incidents prisoners used two types of aggressive actions against victims, compared to less than 5% of No Injury incidents.

Officers used handcuffs and physical force in more than half of incidents and used pepper spray in fewer than a tenth of incidents. There was a significant difference between the severity of the incident and the proportion of incidents where officers used handcuffs or pepper spray. As the severity of the incident increased, as did the frequency with which officers used handcuffs

and pepper spray. Officers used physical force in more than two thirds of Non-serious incidents, compared to more than half of Serious incidents and almost half of No Injury incidents. Taken together, officers used some form of physical measure (e.g., physical force, pepper spray) in 80.8% of Serious incidents and in 70% of Non-serious.

Exploratory Analyses

Shown in Table 2, there was a significant relationship between factors that contributed to the incident occurring and the environmental context it occurred in. Notably, officers giving prisoners instructions was the most common context for incidents across all environmental contexts. Notably, almost three fifths of incidents that occurred during movements were preceded by officers instructing prisoners. Almost a third of incidents that occurred in or around a prisoner's cell were prompted by officers giving prisoners instructions and almost a fifth were door hatch-related or occurred immediately after officers unlocked the prisoner's cell door.

As shown in Table 2, there was also a relationship between the environmental context of the incident and whether the prisoner was verbally abusive. Prisoners were most commonly verbally abusive in incidents that occurred during assessments or medical appointments (almost two thirds of incidents) and prisoners were least verbally abusive during incidents that occurred while officers were routinely dispensing meals or medication.

Discussion

We examined reports of physical assault incidents by prisoners towards corrections officers to understand the victims of incidents, the characteristics of incidents (i.e., the contexts they occurred in, the actions of prisoners and officers during incidents) and to understand whether victim or incident characteristics were associated with the level of severity of the incident. We aimed to a) describe characteristics of the victims of prisoner to officer assault, b)

describe characteristics of the incidents themselves, and c) examine the similarities and differences of victim and incident characteristics across three levels of severity.

More Exposure to Prisoners Produced Greater Opportunities to be Assaulted

Almost 90% of all corrections staff in New Zealand work in frontline roles that involve contact with prisoners (e.g., corrections officers, probation officers, medical staff; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024a). Although people in these roles have contact with prisoners to varying degrees, less than two fifths of corrections staff are corrections *officers* and therefore have consistent interactions with prisoners in units (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024a). However, even corrections officers have varying levels of contact with prisoners depending on their level of seniority; as officers gain seniority (i.e., get promoted to senior or principal corrections officer roles) their interactions with prisoners lessen because they also manage administrative tasks (e.g., processing prisoners' requests).

We found that as officers held more senior roles—and therefore had fewer interactions with prisoners—the frequency of which they were assaulted by prisoners decreased. This finding in the current research supports the established finding that the more contact officers have with prisoners, the greater opportunity there is for them to be physically assaulted (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Corrections officers have near constant interaction with prisoners while they complete tasks as part of the daily regime (e.g., locking and unlocking prisoners, moving prisoners), and are generally “the first to be exposed to inmates' frustrations” (Boudoukha et al., 2013, p. 2343). Corrections officers typically interact with groups of prisoners at one time, which reduces their ability to effectively monitor situations and detect signs that prisoners may physically assault them (e.g., tense body language, verbal abuse). Further, when officers interact with groups of prisoners at one time, their risk of being physically assaulted is

increased because officers are exposed to the frustrations of multiple prisoners at once (rather than managing the needs of an individual prisoner). As officers gain seniority, they typically have contact with prisoners on an as-required basis (e.g., a senior corrections officer notifying a prisoner of punishment, a principal corrections officer meeting with a prisoner) and typically interact with individual prisoners rather than groups. The difference in contact between prisoners and officers in different roles, and the nature in which they interact, means that some officers (i.e., corrections officers) may have more exposure to prisoners and therefore greater opportunity for being physically assaulted than others (Steiner & Woolredge, 2017).

Contributing Factors as Motivations for Prisoners Using Violence

Goal Motivated Violence and Rational Choice Theory

The contributing factors coded here may lend support to previous theories of why prisoners physically assault corrections officers. Although we recorded the contributing factors that were apparent in the officer-written reports, for most incidents there was limited detail regarding the decision-making behind the assault—with a few exceptions. We coded fewer than 3% of incidents as ‘goal motivated’, where prisoners gave reasoning for why they assaulted an officer, with the intention of achieving a specific goal. Prisoners may use violence as a survival strategy and as a means to acquire power and respect in prison (i.e., using violence may give the impression that prisoners are tough and others should not mess with them; Morgan, 2009). Alternatively, prisoners may also strategically use violence to achieve goals (e.g., moving to a safer unit or a more notorious unit; Goulette et al., 2022). These findings in previous research aligned with some incidents in our sample. For example, a prisoner wanted to move out of his current unit and considered it *safer* to assault an officer rather than a prisoner because officers would immediately stop the assault (whereas he speculated that officers may let prisoners fight

before intervening) and that attacking another prisoner put him at risk of being stabbed. These goal motivated assaults aligned with Rational Choice Theory, where perpetrators of violence may assess the risks and benefits of committing acts of violence before they do so (Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Steele, 2015). Demonstrated in previous research and illustrated in examples from our sample, it is clear that some violence against corrections officers was planned.

Reactive Violence and Strain Theory

Strain theory posits that people use violence in response to the strains they experience (i.e., removal of positively valued stimuli, being prevented from achieving goals, to alleviate experiencing noxious stimuli; Agnew, 1992). We found that some contributing factors aligned with strain theory because they either directly represented the strains that prisoners experienced (e.g., officers denying prisoners' requests aligned with the strain of being prevented from achieving goals) or they served as reminders of strain (e.g., officers giving prisoners instructions served as a reminder of their lack of autonomy, a positively valued stimuli; Blevins et al., 2010). Other previous research also aligns with these findings; two North American studies that examined violence against corrections officers by prisoners also found that assaults commonly occurred when officers gave verbal directives or commands to prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2024).

That corrections officers may serve as reminder of the strain prisoners experience in prison aligns with previous research that suggests prisoners may view corrections officers as a physical representation of the judicial process (e.g., the justice system, Ara Poutama Aotearoa as an entity). A U.S. study that examined the causes of corrections officers' injuries effectively illustrated this point, stating that "corrections officers are the physical manifestation of authority and are in direct contact with inmates... they are often the target of attacks simply as a result of

being present and accessible” (Goulette et al., 2022, p. 24). Further, prisoners may assault officers because of previous grievances (e.g., previous conflict with other officers; Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Higgins et al., 2023) and may simply “express emotional energy by striking the first officer they encounter” (Light, 1991, p. 249). There were several incidents in our sample that aligned with Light’s (1991) finding above: violence officers described as “random” and as “coming out of nowhere”.

Instrumental Versus Hostile Aggression

Although there was a distinction between some incidents that were instrumental in nature (i.e., planned, with the intention of achieving a particular goal) and incidents that were hostile or reactive (i.e., prisoners assaulting an officer immediately after being reprimanded by the officer), we agree that the ‘instrumental versus hostile’ dichotomy of aggression does not capture the range of violence perpetrated by prisoners (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Some violence may be both emotionally motivated (i.e., hostile) but also be planned (i.e., instrumental). The incidents described above that officers considered ‘random’ may have actually been emotionally motivated but the prisoner may have planned when they would react to it. For example, if a night shift officer disturbed a prisoner’s sleep by making unnecessary noise, the prisoner may become angry and plan to assault the next officer they have contact with (typically the officer unlocking them in the morning). This violence is reactive to one officer’s behaviour but is planned to align with the prisoner’s next opportunity to interact with any officer, which illustrates that the motivations for violence may not necessarily fit the instrumental versus hostile aggression dichotomy.

Closer Interactions Were Associated With More Serious Injuries

We found that almost a fifth of incidents occurred during movements, which was slightly lower than found in previous research (i.e., approximately a third of assaultive incidents against

staff occurred during movements; McNeeley, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2011). Although violence occurred less frequently during movements in our sample compared to previous research, we found that violence that occurred during movements most commonly resulted in serious injuries for officers (i.e., Serious incidents, compared to No Injury or Non-serious incidents). From the incident reports in our sample, it was difficult to determine why movements were a risky time for Serious incidents to occur, however, we speculate that two variables may interact to produce more serious outcomes for victims. First, proximity with officers during movements may allow for prisoners to use a myriad of aggressive actions against officers that may not be available to them in different contexts (i.e., prisoners may punch or kick officers, compared to throwing objects while locked in their cell). Second, more than half of incidents during movements were preceded by officers instructing prisoners: a contributing factor that may result in reactive violence because it may be a source of strain (discussed above). Taken together, victims may sustain more serious injuries from incidents during movements because prisoners have fewer barriers (i.e., cell doors) to prevent them from expressing emotionally based (i.e., hostile) aggression.

Movements may also be risky depending on the emotional state of the prisoner being moved and the context of the movement (e.g., whether they want to be moved, where they are moving to or from). For instance, prisoners may be expressing their resistance to being moved to a unit or prison to which they are strongly opposed (e.g., units with opposing gang members, more secure units) and they may be physically resistant to officers (i.e., with physical violence). On the other hand, prisoners may be being moved following distressing events (e.g., after receiving negative outcomes in court) or problematic behavior, and so may be already in a highly

emotional state, potentially increasing the risk of reactively lashing out at officers during the activity.

As Incident Severity Increased, so did Officers' Responses

Generally, depending on the severity of incidents, the level of response by officers increased (i.e., officers used more serious actions in serious incidents). But use of force—where officers used physical control to restrain prisoners—was an exception; notably, officers used force more frequently during Non-serious incidents compared to Serious incidents. The content of incident reports sometimes indicated that the officers chose to use force to prevent the incident from escalating: that is, in a pre-emptive way. Officers may have already been assaulted by prisoners which was reasonable grounds to use physical force to prevent prisoners further harming officers. This finding aligns with previous research that examined situational risk factors for prisoner-to-officer violence in the U.S., which found that officers' use of physical force “reduced the likelihood that an assault would be completed” (i.e., the prisoner made physical contact with the officer; McNeeley, 2021, p. 368). In New Zealand prisons, the use of physical force by officers towards prisoners is “limited to the minimum degree reasonable and necessary to resolve a situation as promptly and as safely as possible” and “can only be used if there are reasonable grounds to believe the use of force is necessary” (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c). If officers have attempted to use other methods to de-escalate conflict (e.g., verbal de-escalation) but have been unsuccessful, they may then use physical force to prevent the incident escalating and causing more harm to officers.

How officers used pepper spray during incidents aligned with custodial policy in New Zealand (Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005). Officers deployed pepper spray in a fifth of serious incidents, in only one Non-serious incident and not at all during No Injury

incidents. Of note, use of pepper spray was typically seen only when responding to incidents where a colleague had already been seriously injured by a prisoner (e.g., lost consciousness). These findings are consistent with officers adhered to custodial policy and only used pepper spray if reasonable and if in proportion to their perceived severity of the incident (Corrections Act, 2004).

Violence may Have Consequences Other than Physical Injury

Physical injury is a serious consequence of prisoner assault that could require victims to undergo external medical care and endure long periods of recovery. However, other aggressive actions that may not cause injury (e.g., spitting, throwing liquids) may make officers ill and may be equally distressing for victims. As a population, prisoners experience high rates of infectious diseases (e.g., HIV) that could be transmitted to officers through bodily fluids. When prisoners spit on officers or throw unidentified liquid at officers, it can be deeply distressing for officers concerned about contracting infectious diseases, who then must undergo medical testing to confirm their health (Cook, 2020). Further, previous research found that prisoners using bodily fluids (i.e., feces, urine, saliva, blood) to assault corrections officers were typically motivated by prisoners wanting to dominate or humiliate officers, which caused significant stress for victims (Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023). Our data were categorized by severity according to the level of injury victims sustained because of the assault; however, we recognize that violence that didn't cause visible physical injury can also cause other types of harm (e.g., illness, emotional harm) to officers.

Implications

By recording the factors that contributed to incidents, our findings contribute to our theoretical understanding of why prisoners may use violence against corrections officers, by

offering support for the Rational Choice Perspective and strain theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Blevins et al., 2010). Previous literature also examines how situational characteristics (e.g., locations, activities in prison) may be riskier for prisoners to assault corrections officers: our findings extend previous research by identifying characteristics that contribute to incidents having *more serious* outcomes for victims.

Taken together, our research has implications for corrections work in practice. By identifying factors that contribute to why prisoners assault officers (e.g., instrumental and hostile violence) and situational factors that may be riskier for serious incidents to occur (e.g., close interactions, lack of physical barriers), our findings offer a cohesive picture of when may be most risky for officers to interact with prisoners. We know that officers are at risk of being assaulted during any interaction with prisoners; however, our findings suggest that officers may consider how multiple factors interact to produce riskier interactions with prisoners. For example, movements were risky activities for Serious incidents to occur because of the physical proximity between officers and prisoners, because prisoners may be highly reactive to officers' behavior (i.e., giving prisoners instructions) during movements, and because the nature of the movement (e.g., moving to a different unit, returning from court). Officers may consider these factors as they interact with prisoners to gauge how receptive prisoners may be to their instructions, and officers may consider preventative measures to maintain their safety (e.g., maintaining a physical distance from prisoners outside of their striking range, monitoring prisoners' emotional state during movements and being alert to changes in the prisoner's mood). By understanding which situations may be risky for serious violence to occur, officers may take preventative measures to keep themselves safe.

Limitations

Our dataset consisted of reports written by corrections officers following violent incidents. Although our data often contained multiple perspectives through multiple incident reports, prisoners' perspectives of the incident were not included. Officers are motivated to report their behavior as meeting professional standards, whether that is strictly the case or not. Further, without prisoners' accounts of what happened, we are missing key information about the background to the incident including any history of conflict between the perpetrator and their goals in carrying out the assault, how long they had been planning the attack, how they decided when and where to do it, who would be the victim, and what they thought would happen as a result.

The quality of narratives also varied, and some were quite brief. However, it is important to acknowledge that administrative tasks, such as writing incident reports, are only a small part of corrections' officers roles. Administrative tasks may be the final task for officers at the end of a long shift or may be quickly completed in between procedural tasks. Furthermore, there was a lack of consistency in reporting of information we sought to code (e.g., the perpetrator's motivation for assaulting the officer), and it is likely that because of the time costs in writing up incidents on busy shifts, it is likely that minor incidents will not always be officially recorded. We noted that as the severity of the incident increased, the recorded information we sought to code was more consistently included in the narratives we analyzed (e.g., the gender of the victim). Better recording of more significant incidents may occur because these incidents may be more likely to lead to internal misconduct charges or referral to police for criminal prosecution than more minor incidents (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2023). Because officers tended to more consistently report serious incidents, it is difficult to determine whether the characteristics of less

serious incidents were fundamentally different from serious incidents, or if they shared characteristics that were just not reported. For example, prisoners may have been verbally abusive at similar frequencies during serious and less serious incidents, but verbal abuse may not have been considered important during serious incidents and therefore not included in the incident report.

Finally, we must acknowledge that our data only included incidents where a prisoner made physical contact with a corrections officer. There may be countless incidents that were successfully de-escalated by officers well before they could proceed into a physical assault, and again, these incidents may not be documented as formal incidents, but even if they are, they would not have been in the dataset from which we extracted our sample because they would not appear as assaults. So from our data, there was no way of knowing whether there were circumstances where conflict was successfully de-escalated before they turned physical and how those situations compared to incidents of physical assault. These incidents that were successfully de-escalated may provide insight into how officers decide how to respond to conflict; how do officers judge whether their de-escalation techniques are working or whether they need to proactively use force to de-escalate an incident that could potentially become violent? By missing incidents where officers successfully de-escalated conflict, it is difficult to determine from our data how officers made decisions to maintain their safety during incidents.

Future Directions

Given these limitations, future research may include prisoners' perspectives of incidents, potentially as eyewitnesses and perpetrators, with suitable protections in place for interviewer safety and prisoner self-incrimination. Future research could follow a similar method to our current study, by conducting a narrative analysis of prisoner complaints following incidents of

violence against officers to capture some of the information that otherwise is missing, while acknowledging that complaints are also not a complete data source and may be biased in various ways (i.e., in terms of who complains and why).

Finally, future research may consider interviews with corrections officers to understand their perspectives of prisoner assaults, including their perspectives of the motivations for prisoners' violence and whether they think assaults can be predicted. Because our data were limited to the physical injuries sustained by victims, we did not know whether violence had any other consequence for victims. Future research may also examine whether the different types of assault, particularly assaults intended to humiliate or intimidate victims, have different consequences for victims.

Chapter Four: Manuscript Three

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Abstract

Being a corrections officer is complex; officers balance security-focused and pastoral tasks as they both manage and care for prisoners, while also managing their risk of being assaulted by prisoners. Characteristics of officers, prisoners, and the prison environment can contribute to the safety of corrections officers; however, less is known about how the working relationships of officers contribute to their perceived safety. To address this gap, we conducted qualitative interviews with 21 corrections officers to develop a theory of how corrections officers' working relationships affect their construction of personal safety at work. Officers thought having positive working relationships with colleagues and prisoners was the most effective tool for maintaining their safety. Positive communication, balancing management and caring, and using discretion were effective strategies officers used to develop working relationships with prisoners. Understanding *how* officers developed positive working relationships at work offers an important first step for improving officers' working relationships with colleagues and prisoners.

Key words: prison violence, corrections officer safety, prisoner-staff assault, prisoner assault, working relationships, dual role balance, use of discretion.

Corrections officers' working relationships in prison and their effect on safety

The role of a corrections officer may be challenging and sometimes dangerous. Corrections officers balance numerous security and pastoral tasks; they both manage and care for prisoners, they mitigate tensions in the prison, and they manage working relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Current research extensively examines individual (i.e., prisoner and officer), environmental (e.g., prison layout, location), and situational (e.g., time of day, crowding) factors that contribute to the safety of corrections officers. Less is known about whether social factors (i.e., the working relationships corrections officers have with prisoners and colleagues) contribute to how safe officers feel at work. To address this gap, using semi-structured interviews and a grounded theory approach, we analysed interviews with 21 corrections officers and aimed to develop a model of whether corrections officers' working relationships affect their construction of personal safety at work.

The role of a corrections officer

The role of a corrections officer is complex; officers must complete a daily regime that ensures prisoners receive their minimum entitlements (e.g., meals, time unlocked from their cells; Ara Poutama Aotearoa [The New Zealand Department of Corrections], n.d.-a) while maintaining the physical security of the prison. All the while, officers may also complete administrative tasks (e.g., attending to near-constant prisoner requests, writing incident reports) alongside managing working relationships with colleagues and prisoners; moreover, some officers may even be involved in prisoners' rehabilitation or have formal case management roles. In New Zealand prisons, where more than half of prisoners are indigenous Māori (52.5%, Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025) competent corrections officers also need a grasp of indigenous (i.e., Māori) culture.

A high level of vigilance is also required, given high rates of verbal abuse and various forms of assault. For some, violence is just ‘part of the job’ (Goulette et al., 2022; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Ricciardelli et al., 2018). And there is some evidence for this view, largely due to physical assault by prisoners, when compared to other professions (e.g., psychiatric hospital staff, nurses at residential facilities) corrections officers are significantly more likely to be injured on the job and take more days off work due to injury (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Many corrections officers may consider being verbally abused by prisoners normal, but the constant abuse and threats can also be demoralising and stressful, and emotionally wear officers down over time (Fayankinnu, 2010; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). Corrections officers report high rates of PTSD and high levels of symptoms of depression and anxiety (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Jaegers et al., 2020; Kinman et al., 2017) and are at high risk of burnout, low job satisfaction, and stress due to the nature of their job (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Jaegers et al., 2020). Officers may not even need to be assaulted themselves to experience these consequences; they also experience high levels of stress and symptoms of PTSD when their colleagues are assaulted by prisoners (i.e., through indirect exposure to assault; Schwartz & Allen, 2024; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017).

Working relationships with colleagues and with prisoners

Throughout their careers, corrections officers form working relationships with their colleagues. Positive working relationships, as defined here are similar to personal relationships (e.g., being built on trust and respect), but differ in being primarily “task-based”, centred around achieving common goals (Gabarro, 1990, p. 81; Tartakovsky, 2023), including completing the daily regime and maintaining safety and security in the prison.

How corrections officers perceive their working relationships with their colleagues may affect how safe they feel at work and the extent to which they are affected by the consequences of their job. Officers who feel more supported by their colleagues may feel safer, less fearful of being assaulted, and less stressed at work compared to officers who experience less colleague support (Lambert et al., 2018; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Poor colleague support is associated with higher levels of reported stress (Ellison & Caudill, 2020).

Corrections officers may also share working relationships with prisoners; however, there is a power imbalance between officer and prisoner that may not formally exist between colleagues. Although this power imbalance is substantial given officers have disciplinary and security roles with prisoners, who are not able to readily leave the relationship environment (i.e., the unit) features of the working alliance between therapists and clients—where a power imbalance is also characteristic—may be useful here. The working alliance is defined by a bond between the two parties, along with common goals and agreed tasks (Bordin, 1979; Haas & Smith, 2019). Corrections officers and prisoners certainly do not share all of their goals. But they may share some, such as the goal of maintaining social order within a unit (Crewe et al., 2015; Gabarro, 1990) albeit that the benefits of social order likely differ by role (e.g., for prisoners maintaining order among themselves minimizes officers' involvement in their activities, whereas officers may primarily prioritise the resulting safe and calm working environment). There may also be agreement on the tasks required to achieve that goal (e.g., searching prisoners returning to the unit, listening to and where possible granting reasonable prisoner requests, following a predictable schedule). Previous research suggests that good working alliances between correctional therapists and prisoners may contribute to increased prisoner engagement in treatment and services, and therefore increased effectiveness of these services (Ross et al., 2008).

But one significant difference between therapist-client alliances and officer-prisoner working relationships is that the latter are involuntary (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Skeem et al., 2007), and for the officer, characterized by dual roles of management and care (Nylander et al., 2011). Research examining relationship quality in mandated community supervision found that the concept of a working alliance did not adequately capture the dual role of probation officers, who “care for, but also have control over” their clients (i.e., probationers; Skeem et al., 2007, p. 397). Probation officers who effectively balanced the two roles (i.e., ‘care’ and ‘control’), had better quality relationships with people on probation including lower rates of recidivism (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Taken together this research suggests that officers who foster positive working relationships with prisoners effectively navigate both the power imbalance of *working alliances*, and the need to balance the ‘caring’ and ‘control’ facets of *dual role relationships*. Positive relationships are built on respect and shared goals where officers maintain professional boundaries.

How officers interact with prisoners impacts their sense of safety

In previous research there are numerous examples illustrating that how corrections officers interact with prisoners affects their perceptions of safety. Firstly, in a study of how corrections officers in Canada viewed threats by prisoners, officers reported feeling safer at work when they treated prisoners “fairly, consistently, and simply as human beings”, because when officers treat prisoners disrespectfully, prisoners may respond aggressively (either verbally or with physical violence) to protect their reputation among their peers (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013, p. 111). In another Canadian study, officers described “deliberately investing in relationships with incarcerated individuals” as a strategy that kept them safe because having a rapport with prisoners may reduce the likelihood that prisoners will engage in misconduct around them

(Schultz, 2023, p. 747). Finally, a U.S. study found that jail staff who believed that prisoners respected them felt safer at work, compared to officers who believed that prisoners did not respect them (Ellison & Gainey, 2020). Officers who treat prisoners disrespectfully (e.g., antagonistically or aggressively; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016) or behave in a “needlessly authoritarian” manner (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020, p. 145) may be perceived poorly by prisoners and may escalate conflict, potentially resulting in officers being injured or needing to use physical force against a prisoner. Further, how officers treat prisoners may affect the safety of their colleagues; prisoners may physically assault an officer who is treated poorly by the officer’s colleague (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006).

Communication. Positive working relationships between officers and prisoners are vital for dynamic security, where officers maintain social order using informal techniques (e.g., communication) rather than formal techniques (e.g., official policy and rules); these working relationships may be developed through officers using prosocial communication (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Defined as “relational but secure” (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016, p. 409), prosocial communication between officers and prisoners is characterised by honest, consistent communication where officers are open with prisoners and prisoners know what they can expect from them. As a result of the ‘relational but secure’ approach, officers describe positive working relationships with prisoners and feel respected by prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016), a factor that may contribute to officers feeling safer at work.

Discretion. The working relationships between prisoners and officers lend insight into how officers routinely keep themselves safe at work. As corrections officers become more experienced, they may improve skills that help them develop a rapport with prisoners, such as learning when to relax and when to enforce minor rules (commonly termed ‘rule-bending’ or

using discretion). For instance, in a study of corrections officers in eastern Canada, officers described being physically and verbally assaulted when they “asserted their authority” over prisoners (i.e., disciplined prisoners or enforced protocols; Ricciardelli et al., 2018, p. 468) and described developing an understanding of when to exercise their authority over prisoners in a way that prisoners were less resistant to (Ricciardelli et al., 2018). In this study, some officers “bent the rules” for prisoners because they feared prisoners, or because they were “fed up” with “enforcing mundane policies” (Ricciardelli et al., 2018, p. 468). However, other participants in the same study described a zero-tolerance approach for rule-bending and believed that consistent rule-following eased tensions between prisoners (because prisoners are less likely to demand favouritism or exceptions) and kept them safe (Ricciardelli et al., 2018). How officers decide which rules can be bent and which must be strictly followed may depend on the culture of the prison. In a study that examined how officers use power in Ukrainian prisons, officers described enforcing rules they considered *necessary* (i.e., when they needed to assert authority to control prisoners; Symkovych, 2023). Officers routinely used informal methods to maintain social order (e.g., coercion, inducement) and enforced formal rules only when necessary (Symkovych, 2023). Moreover, the author described some rules as “over-restrictive” and “petty” (e.g., making prisoners wear correct uniform, making prisoners stand up to greet staff): a sentiment shared by officers who did not enforce over-restrictive rules (Symkovych, 2023, p. 67).

This study

The working relationships of corrections officers with colleagues, and with prisoners, and how they develop those working relationships (e.g., using discretion, communication) may contribute to how officers perceive their workplace and their role. However, to our knowledge,

there is no theoretical model of how corrections officers perceive associations between their working relationships and personal safety. There has also been limited examination of how corrections officers view their working relationships with colleagues alongside their working relationships with prisoners. Therefore, in this research we used grounded theory with interviews of corrections officers; we developed a theoretical model of how corrections officers view their personal safety at work and whether their working relationships affect their perceived safety.

Method

We used a qualitative design following a constructivist grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2006) to conduct interviews with corrections officers employed by Ara Poutama Aotearoa¹⁰. In New Zealand, more than 4,000 people work as corrections officers across 18 prisons, and they are tasked with managing men and women in facilities ranging from minimum to maximum security (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024). We used snowball sampling to recruit participants; first, we began by interviewing a few officers who had agreed to be recontacted in a previous project and then asked them to nominate colleagues for us to approach. We also approached corrections staff during prison fieldwork for a related project, and again, interviewed those who were interested. This research was approved by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC(Health)2021#91) and the Research and Evaluation Steering Committee at Ara Poutama Aotearoa. The participant information sheet and attached consent form can be found in the supplemental materials.

¹⁰ The first author in this study is an indigenous PhD student with no prior experience in prison research and limited interactions with corrections officers prior to conducting this research. The second and third authors are psychology academics who were previously correctional psychologists and significant professional experience in prison research. The second author is also an indigenous New Zealander.

Participants

We interviewed 21 corrections officers who had worked in a frontline, prisoner-facing role at any point in their career. Some participants had progressed to leadership roles by the time they were interviewed (e.g., senior and principal corrections officers and upper management: regional managers, special project managers, etc.). Most participants were in roles with consistent, direct contact with prisoners ($n = 14$; 66.6%) while a third held positions in middle management or higher ($n = 8$; 38.1%; e.g., principal corrections officers, managers). Almost three-quarters of participants were men ($n = 15$; 71.4%). Most participants were currently employed by Ara Poutama Aotearoa ($n = 17$; 81.0%) but almost one fifth were previous employees who had left no more than one year prior to being interviewed ($n = 4$; 19.1%). Participants ranged in years of experience at Ara Poutama Aotearoa from 2 years to 47 years ($M = 13.78$; $SD = 11.98$). In total, participants had worked across ten of the 18 prisons in New Zealand, including two women's prisons and eight men's prisons.

Interviews

All participants gave verbal or written consent prior to the interview and understood that they could not be identified in this research and would remain fully anonymous. We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, which allowed the discussion to follow a natural course for each participant. We asked participants to discuss their experiences as corrections officers (i.e., their experiences in positions with consistent, direct contact with prisoners), however during interviews participants also naturally discussed their current roles. We also asked participants to share their experiences throughout their career as a corrections officer, including any similarities and differences they may have encountered across different units and different institutions. During the initial interviews, we used a schedule of main topics to guide the

interview and systematically updated the topics and questions for later interviews as new categories emerged from the data (this interview schedule can be found in the supplemental materials). Most interviews ($n = 17$; 81.0%) were conducted remotely (either by phone call or video conferencing due to resourcing constraints); however, more than a quarter were completed in-person at the participant's place of work or other chosen location. On average interviews lasted around one hour and 15 minutes (interviews ranged from 36 minutes to 125 minutes). After completing their interview, participants received a voucher for their participation.

Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

We followed a constructivist grounded theory process during data collection and analysis, where we concurrently collected and analysed data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We audio recorded interviews¹¹ and uploaded the recording to an automated transcription service following each interview. Then, we manually checked each generated transcript for accuracy and sent it back to the interviewee. Once they had verified that the content of their interview was acceptable for use, we read each transcript multiple times to familiarise ourselves with the data. After familiarising ourselves with the data, we began open coding by assigning meaning (i.e., codes) to sections of text in each transcript using NVivo 14 (release 14.23.2). Sections of text included phrases, sentences, and full paragraphs of text. Next, we imported all codes from that round into Microsoft Excel to complete axial coding (e.g., making connections between codes and identifying key categories). We did this by manually sorting 'like' codes into overarching themes that we had noted during interviews. These were informed by our interview schedule, or came up frequently in initial codes (e.g., verbal abuse, use of discretion). As categories emerged, subcategories of each also emerged, consisting of properties (i.e., characteristics that described

¹¹ One participant did not consent to being audiorecorded; therefore we took handwritten notes instead.

each subcategory) and dimensions (i.e., variations within properties). We began visualising the connections between categories and subcategories using digital (e.g., free online diagramming software) and physical (e.g., pen and paper) tools. This process helped us establish connections between categories and identified gaps that we then included in our interview schedule to investigate with later participants. We repeated this process until no new codes emerged from the data, indicating that we had reached theoretical saturation and that no additional data would be found in future interviews that would further develop the emerged categories (Favourate, 2020; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once we had completed axial coding, we began selective coding where we integrated all relevant themes into a cohesive overarching model to understand how social factors in prisons affect how corrections officers perceive safety as a phenomenon. Most initial coding (i.e., open and axial coding) was completed by the first author. Each stage of coding (e.g., open, axial, and selective) was periodically reviewed and discussed with the third author and then reviewed by the second author to help to identify and reduce researcher bias and to ensure accuracy and clarity in the analytical process. Below we explain the model (Figure 1) that emerged from the selective coding process. To protect the privacy of participants, we have used pseudonyms when reporting quotations.

Results

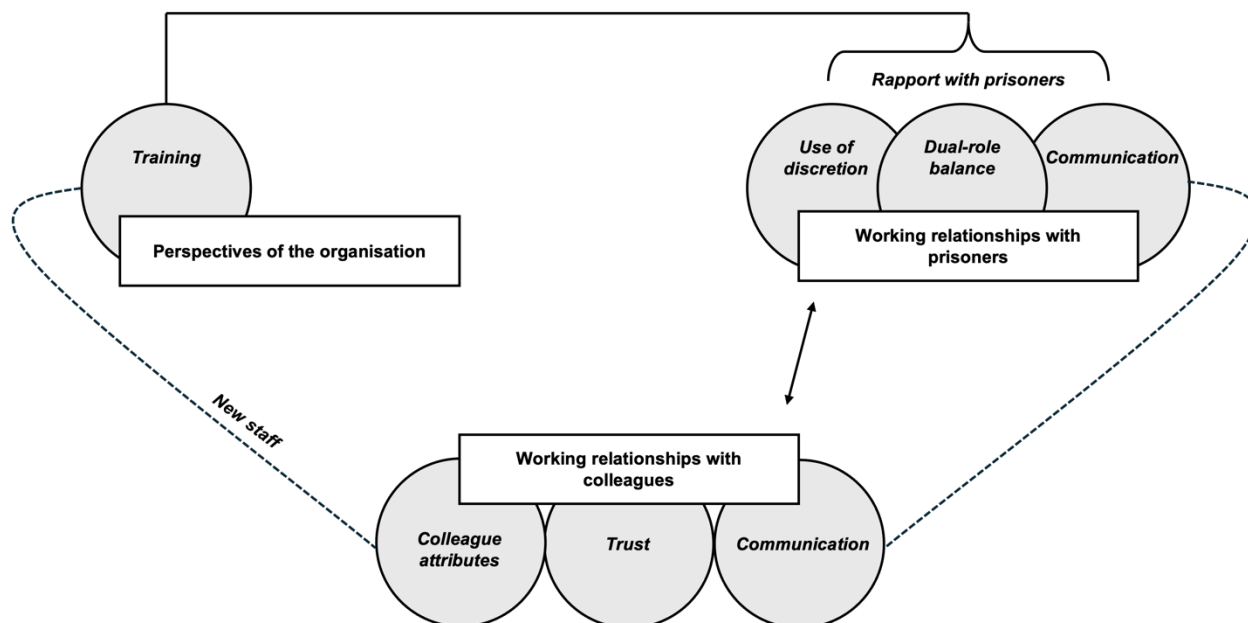
Figure 1 depicts a summary of the theoretical model of corrections officers' constructions of their safety at work. As shown in Figure 1, the categories that emerged from the data were: working relationships with prisoners, working relationships with colleagues, and officers' perspectives of the organisation. We outline each of these categories in turn and describe the subcategories and the properties that emerged from each category. We also explain the relationships between subcategories within categories, and the connections between categories.

Working relationships with prisoners

Having good working relationships with prisoners was seen as integral to participants' safety in the workplace. In general, participants described their working relationships with prisoners as good with occasional conflict and typically demonstrated a humanising attitude towards prisoners: that they were “still people” and should be treated the same as anyone else. Key subcategories that emerged as contributors to good quality working relationships were communication, balancing the dual roles of corrections officers (i.e., managing and caring), and officer use of discretion. These three subcategories interact to produce a fourth subcategory: rapport with prisoners.

Figure 1.

Summary of Theoretical Model of Categories (square boxes) and Subcategories (italics) that Contribute to the Culture of Prisons and that Affect the Safety of Corrections Officers.



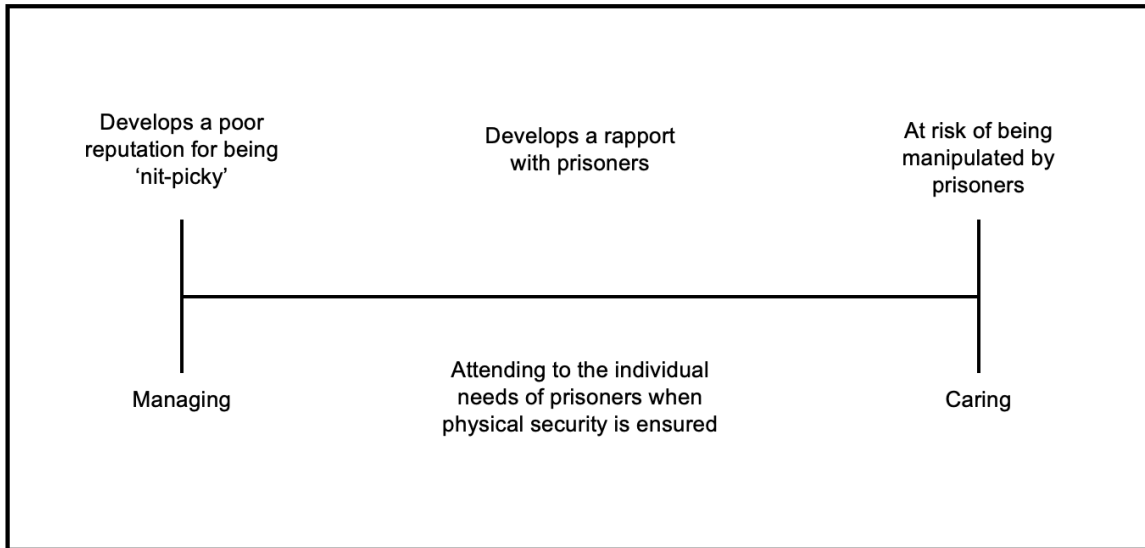
Communication. The first subcategory in the ‘Working relationships with prisoners’ category was communication. Four properties emerged from this subcategory: respect, honesty, directness, and using humour. Officers who successfully demonstrated these properties when

communicating with prisoners increased their perceived safety by developing a rapport with prisoners. Conversely, officers who demonstrated negative dimensions of those properties (e.g., disrespect, dishonesty) or other negative properties (e.g., antagonism) when communicating with prisoners decreased their perceived safety by creating tension between themselves and prisoners. ‘Using humour’ emerged from the model as a property of communication that both increased or decreased the safety of officers. Depending on the officer, the prisoner, and the situation, some participants thought using humour with prisoners may increase the safety of officers by helping develop a rapport with prisoners, but on the other hand, it may decrease an officer’s safety by potentially aggravating a prisoner with an ill-timed joke. Taken together, participants reported that officers who successfully demonstrated all four properties of communication adopted a ‘firm but fair’ approach, where they consistently used positive properties of communication without crossing professional boundaries with prisoners (e.g., being their friend). Using a ‘firm but fair’ communication style helped officers behave consistently across prisoners and situations, which participants thought was valued by prisoners because all prisoners were treated the same and knew what they could expect from officers (which was not always true, described below in the ‘use of discretion’ subcategory).

Michelle: You can be friendly, but not their friend. You can have empathy, but not sympathy. And you can be firm, but fair. I can be quite direct, but I can also be very empathetic to what you're going through.

Figure 2.

The Outcomes for Officers on the ‘Managing and Caring’ Spectrum.



Dual-role balance. We were interested in how participants viewed their role and how they managed the dual-role balance between managing prisoners (i.e., physical security) and caring for prisoners (i.e., attending to the individual needs of prisoners). As shown in Figure 2, how officers balanced managing and caring existed on a spectrum. Officers' behaviour moved throughout the spectrum depending on the prisoner, the situation, and the officer's level of experience in the role. Moving between managing and caring may be challenging for some officers; several participants described colleagues who did not successfully manage the dual-role balance and consistently positioned themselves too far on one side, affecting their working relationships with prisoners and therefore their safety. For example, officers who adopt a military-like attitude and focus solely on physical security may develop a poor reputation by disciplining prisoners for every minor indiscretion and therefore may be targeted by prisoners for verbal or physical assault (which may in turn reduce the safety of other officers who must aid their colleague during incidents of violence). On the other hand, officers who prioritise caring for—and catering to—prisoners may be at risk for 'getting got' (i.e., being manipulated by prisoners), putting them at risk of assault if they do not comply with prisoners. Officers who

successfully balanced managing and caring did so by addressing the individual needs of prisoners once the physical security of the unit was certain (i.e., once they had completed their tasks in the regime, then they were willing to attend to prisoners' needs). These successful officers also typically reported developing a rapport with prisoners because prisoners knew they could rely on these officers to attend to their needs when possible.

Use of discretion. The third subcategory of 'Working relationships with prisoners' captured how participants interpreted the formal rules of the prison (e.g., their perceptions of 'rule-bending' and use of discretion). A property that emerged in this subcategory was officers' attitudes towards using discretion and the degree to which bending rules was seen as acceptable to keep themselves safe. Some officers interpreted the rules as having "grey areas" and believed that using discretion increased their safety by helping the regime run smoothly (discussed below), while others strictly followed the rules and believed using discretion reduced their safety.

Ashley: The rules keep us safe. That's why they're there. But I think people see the grey every now and then, yeah. To me, the day I see grey is the day I leave.

It is important to note that the rules that officers interpreted as being 'grey areas' did not directly compromise their physical safety (e.g., not locking prisoners in their cells, turning a blind eye to prisoners concealing weapons) but were less serious infractions (e.g., prisoners wearing incorrect uniform, prisoners having an extra piece of fruit). Officers do not interpret rules exactly the same way their colleagues do, and individual officers may also interpret rules inconsistently across prisoners and situations. Depending on the officer, the prisoner, and the situation, officers may relax or tighten rules. When relaxing the rules, officers may first assess the risk of the prisoner exploiting them in the future (i.e., manipulating the officer or expecting preferential treatment) or the risk that their supervisor will disapprove of their actions (i.e., the

risk of being reprimanded for relaxing the rules). For example, if an officer and prisoner share a rapport, the officer may be more lenient and relax the rules for them because they trust that that prisoner will not cause problems in the unit (and therefore alert the officer's supervisor to their use of discretion). However, if that same prisoner is aggressive, an officer may not relax the rules for them because the risk of doing so is increased. On the other hand, if a prisoner has a history of misconduct an officer may tighten the rules to preemptively mitigate the risk that the prisoner will engage in further misconduct.

Participants reported that how an individual officer uses discretion with an individual prisoner may affect their own and their colleagues' safety with that prisoner, but also with the collective of prisoners in the unit. Further, an officer's use of discretion may affect a prisoner's (or a group of prisoners') perceptions of fairness; when prisoners feel unfairly treated, they may become aggressive (described below). Firstly, an individual officer using discretion may reduce the safety of colleagues because if an officer relaxes the rules for a prisoner, the prisoner may expect other officers to behave consistently and become aggressive if other officers do not relax the rules in the same way. Secondly, an individual officer using discretion may reduce their own safety by creating tension among prisoners, because they allowed one prisoner something they then did not allow another prisoner (e.g., specific property items). As a result, prisoners may be upset with the individual officer and want to punish them (therefore increasing their likelihood of verbally or physically assaulting the officer). An officer's inconsistent use of discretion between prisoners may also create direct conflict between prisoners, which may require officer intervention (therefore again putting themselves—and their colleagues—in physical danger). Finally, as mentioned above, some officers may use discretion with individual prisoners with the aim of keeping the regime in a unit running smoothly, which may then keep the collective of

prisoners happy and therefore increase the safety of their colleagues. For example, if a prisoner is found to have taken more fruit for his lunch than is formally allowed, an officer may ‘let it slide’ (i.e., turn a blind eye to it) to prevent conflict and keep the regime running smoothly (rather than reprimanding the prisoner and creating tension in the unit). Officers may also relax rules across a unit with the intention of keeping the regime running smoothly; for example, officers may relax rules by allowing all prisoners in a unit to have more than one fan or keep nail clippers in their cells (rather than issuing them out from the guardroom).

Whether officers used discretion or not helped them develop a rapport with prisoners in different ways. Described above, participants thought that prisoners positively regarded officers who used discretion to keep the regime running smoothly because those officers were more lenient with prisoners. On the other hand, participants also thought that officers who did not use discretion may also be perceived favourably by prisoners because prisoners knew what they could expect from those officers (reflecting the finding above in the subcategory ‘dual-role balance’). Further, when prisoners perceive themselves to be treated fairly by officers, they may be less likely to ‘play up’ (i.e., cause problems) for that officer, which facilitates rapport between prisoners and officers, and contributes to the regime running smoothly.

Rapport with prisoners. Recall that a facet of a good working alliance is a bond between therapist and client; the rapport between officer and prisoner translates to sharing a bond and contributes to a good working relationship. Participants reported that an officer’s communication style, how they balanced managing and caring, and their use of discretion helped officers develop a rapport with prisoners. Having a rapport meant that officers had an understanding of prisoners which facilitated a closer, more harmonious relationship between them. In turn, having a rapport with prisoners helped officers develop good working

relationships with prisoners by prisoners being more amenable to their shared goals. Having a rapport with prisoners keeps officers safe routinely throughout their shift because prisoners may be less likely to cause problems in the unit when they have a rapport with officers on duty. For example, one participant described a prisoner apologising for breaking the rules because he had done so thinking that a different officer was on shift. Having a rapport with prisoners may help humanise officers to prisoners, meaning that a prisoner may view them as a less desirable target to assault than a colleague who lacks that rapport. Participants described physical assaults by prisoners not being an attack on them as a *person*, but as an attack on the officer as the physical embodiment of the correctional system: a concept that we termed ‘the blue uniform’. When officers and prisoners have a rapport, prisoners may view that officer as a person rather than just a ‘blue uniform’, therefore decreasing the likelihood that they would assault that officer.

Taylor: But I think talking to them is probably the biggest thing that I do... Because I think once they realise you're a human, you're not the first one that they're gunning for. It cuts out a lot of that unnecessary tension that might be building up.

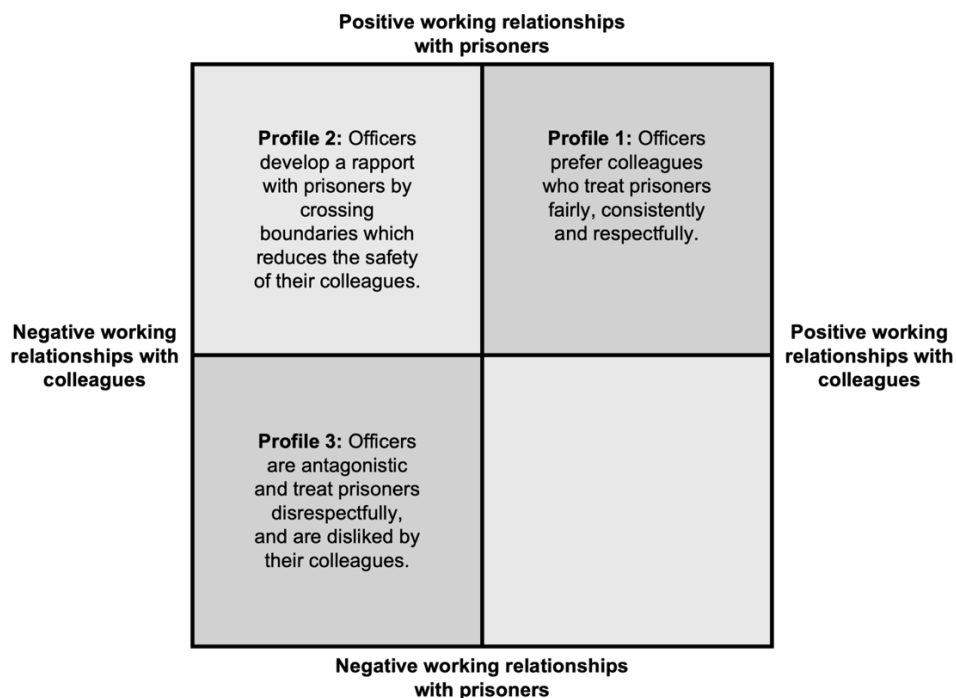
Working relationships with colleagues

Good working relationships with colleagues were seen as important for both the physical safety and the wellbeing of officers. How participants described the quality of their working relationships with colleagues existed on a continuum between being a ‘big blue family’ (i.e., people outside of prison could not possibly understand them so they relied on each other) to competitive relationships characterised by tension, conflict and gossip, but most described their working relationships as ‘generally good’. Some participants described what we have termed ‘prisoner-colleague-overlap’ (visualised in Figure 1 with a bidirectional arrow between the relevant categories): overlap between their working relationships with prisoners and their

working relationships with colleagues where one relationship affected the quality of the other. Three profiles of prisoner-colleague-overlap emerged from the data (Figure 3). Firstly, officers who developed positive working relationships with prisoners by being respectful, fair and consistent, were typically considered to be colleagues that participants preferred working with because they felt safer. In the second profile, officers who developed working relationships with prisoners through unprofessional means (e.g., by crossing boundaries such as by sharing personal information with prisoners) were disliked by their colleagues because their approach created tension between officers and prisoners, because prisoners expected other officers to cross boundaries as well. Finally, participants described officers who developed negative working relationships with prisoners (e.g., a lack of respect and rapport, no balance between managing or caring) by being antagonistic and disrespectful, which contributed for those officers to poor working relationships with colleagues. Colleagues avoided working with those officers due to differences in personal values (i.e., they did not like them) or they thought that the colleague escalated situations and therefore put them at risk. The fourth quadrant in Figure 3 (where officers developed good working relationships with colleagues by having negative working relationships with prisoners) is empty because it did not emerge from our data. In the 'Working relationships with colleagues' category, four subcategories emerged: communication, trust, colleague attributes, and new staff.

Figure 3.

The Three Profiles of the Prisoner-Colleague-Overlap.



Communication. Most participants described their working relationships with colleagues as being built on communication with the same properties they described for their working relationships with prisoners (i.e., respect, honesty, directness and using humour). A new property of communication that emerged was information sharing, which captured both formal and casual methods of communication. A formal method of information sharing was communication during pre-shift briefings where officers were informed of any muster or regime changes in the unit, and an informal method of information sharing was officers maintaining constant communication with each other while completing the daily regime. Participants reported that having a common information base reduced confusion between officers over what was happening at particular times (and who was required to complete each task) and therefore helped the regime to run on time and the unit to stay in order. It also increased safety by keeping all officers up to date about any incidents during the previous or current shift (e.g., prisoner grievances, conflict) that needed extra attention by staff as they moved through their shift.

Trust. Most participants thought that their working relationships were built on the level of trust between themselves and their colleagues and described having good quality working relationships even with colleagues they didn't personally like but could trust. For example, one interviewee described a colleague they trusted to 'have their back' regardless of personal feelings.

Taylor: And there's one that... we will never be friends. But I know if anything kicked off, she would be the first one behind me. So, I trust that. I don't like her, but I trust her.

On the other hand, a lack of trust with colleagues contributed to a poor working relationship, where they were unsure whether their colleague would keep them safe in the unit. One interviewee described a colleague telling them "jokingly to [the interviewee's] face" that they would not respond if [the interviewee] pressed their duress alarm.

Colleague attributes. 'Colleague attributes' as a subcategory explores the relationship between how safe officers feel and the characteristics they attribute to their colleagues. Two properties emerged from this subcategory: physicality (e.g., fitness, strength, size) and skills (e.g., communication, verbal de-escalation, awareness). Officers felt safer working with colleagues who possessed strong physical attributes (e.g., good health, physical strength, bigger stature) compared to weaker physical attributes (e.g., physically weaker and smaller, unwell or ill). They also felt safer working with colleagues with more developed interpersonal skills (e.g., better communicators, more rapport with prisoners) than officers with deficits in these skills or who did not value these skills. Most notably, officers preferred to work with colleagues who were respected by prisoners, who had longer experience working in prison, and who were effective communicators.

New staff. From the ‘colleague attributes’ subcategory a further subcategory emerged that we labelled ‘new staff’, which highlighted a difference between established officers and officers who had been working in prison for less than two years. ‘New staff’ were viewed as a significant source of stress and frustration for established officers and were characterised as unprepared for the dangers of the job (attributed to misleading recruitment strategies and deficits in training) and as poor communicators (attributed to cultural differences, language barriers, or deficits in training). When new staff were unprepared for the dangers of the job, they were described as fearful and avoidant of prisoner-facing tasks, meaning their colleagues had to complete extra tasks over and above their own workload. Participants reported that when new staff had difficulty communicating with prisoners it angered prisoners and created tension in the unit, which reduced the safety of both the new officer and their colleagues when they had to intervene to de-escalate the conflict. Poor communication may stem from cultural differences when new officers are immediately recruited upon entrance to the country, which is usually associated with deficits in cultural knowledge and is frustrating for prisoners (e.g., when officers who are not indigenous incorrectly pronounce indigenous words).

Joseph: We have new staff that don't really know the culture around the jail. Prisoners get frustrated with it and so you know that's when our assaults happen, is when they're unhappy about something.

As previously discussed, officers may use discretion with prisoners depending on their rapport and the quality of their working relationship with that prisoner. However, participants thought that because new staff lacked the rapport that experienced officers shared with prisoners, they also lacked the skill of judging when it was appropriate to relax rules or when it was necessary to say no to prisoners. Because new staff had not yet developed a rapport with

prisoners or the skill to use discretion, the extent to which new staff enforced rules typically fell into two categories: ‘over-enforcing’ or ‘under-enforcing’. New staff who over-enforced rules were characterised as being ‘nit-picky’, where they strictly followed “the book” (i.e., the formal rules of the prison), and reprimanded prisoners for every little infringement, where a more experienced officer may “let things slide”. This very strict application of the rules that may be more typical of newly trained officers then reduces all officer safety because it creates conflict that may then escalate into a physical incident.

John: I think new staff nit-pick at everything. And the old staff, they're just kind of not too worried about the small stuff. The bigger stuff they deal with.

Interviewer: What is the effect then, of new staff members being overly kind of nit-picky?

John: Yeah, a lot. They can escalate like little situations. They can escalate something so small into a big... it could really end up in [control and restraint].

On the other hand, new staff who under-enforced rules were described by participants as being “yes people” (i.e., they did not say no to prisoners’ requests) which supported the belief that new staff let prisoners “get away with more stuff” compared to more experienced officers. Participants thought these new staff attempted to model the behaviour of their more experienced colleagues (i.e., enforcing rules with discretion); however, because they lacked the rapport or skills of their colleagues, they also lacked the judgement of when a “yes” should be a “no”. However, because these officers were “yes people”, they reduced their own safety because they were optimal targets for prisoners to manipulate. Experienced officers described working with new staff as exhausting, because they needed to look out for their colleague as well as themselves.

John: At the moment, a lot of new staff. And the prisoners know that they get away with a lot of things. But when I'm on with the new staff, you've got a long day. Long, hard day. But when you're on with older experienced staff, it's much easier, much smoother experience.

In relation to new staff using discretion, the above excerpt also relates to the subcategory 'colleague attributes', where officers may prefer to work with colleagues depending on their skills. Generally, "old staff" preferred working with "old staff".

Shown in Figure 1, the subcategory 'New staff' was closely linked to both the subcategories 'Colleague attributes' (within the 'Working relationships with colleagues' category) and 'Training' (within the 'Perspectives of the organisation' category). It was clear that new staff reduced the safety of officers in various ways, and some officers attributed the deficits of new staff to deficits in training. Although participants consistently agreed that the training of new staff was the responsibility of people in management positions, the role that each participant held themselves tended to affect who they thought was responsible. Participants who held middle management positions (i.e., senior or principal corrections officers) tended to describe a *personal responsibility* for the training of new staff, whereas participants who were corrections officers *designated responsibility* to 'the organisation'.

Perspectives of the organisation

Closely related to the category of 'Working relationships with colleagues', the category 'Perspectives of the organisation' emerged from the data, with the subcategory 'training'. Regarding initial training (i.e., training to become a corrections officer¹²), two conflicting

¹² In New Zealand, corrections officers receive ten weeks of training. Applicants complete a week-long induction at their allocated site, five weeks of training in the National Learning Centre in the Wellington region, then five weeks of shadowing established officers at their allocated site. Training consists of practical skills (e.g.,

perspectives emerged which depended on whether participants were recalling their own perspectives or if they were discussing new staff. When describing their own experiences, participants thought that the initial training adequately prepared officers for the realities of prison and what was expected of them in their role. However, it is important to consider that these officers were typically early career themselves and therefore may have over-enhanced their preparation to distance themselves from ‘new staff’. On the other hand, when discussing new staff entering prison, participants thought there were deficits in the initial training that resulted in new staff being unprepared to work in prison and reduced the safety of those officers and their colleagues. These deficits in the training included: being too content heavy, being rushed or too condensed, being too focused on physical skills¹³ (i.e., control and restraint) and lacking ‘soft skills’ (i.e., attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, such as communication or interpersonal skills). Participants also described deficits in the refresher training they received annually to revise their control and restraint skills, where the training was too rushed and too infrequent. They also highlighted the lack of ongoing training for soft skills, only physical restraint skills. Ineffective training was viewed as putting officers at risk because they might be inadequately prepared to control or de-escalate potentially physical incidents and they may be injured before a prisoner is properly restrained.

Discussion

Following a constructivist grounded theory approach, we interviewed 21 corrections officers with the aim of identifying whether the working relationships of corrections officers

control and restraint), soft skills (e.g., communication), and role-specific skills (e.g., writing reports, navigating technology).

¹³ Regarding physical restraint skills, according to Ara Poutama Aotearoa (n.d.-c), “force can only be used once prison staff have exhausted every effort to defuse a situation peacefully without the need for force. The use of force is limited to the minimum degree reasonable and necessary to resolve a situation as promptly and as safely as possible.

affected their perceptions of their own safety on the job. From these interviews, we developed a theoretical model that captured how working relationships between officers and prisoners, working relationships between colleagues, and officers' perceptions of the organisation they work for, contribute to and interact to affect the safety of corrections officers. Overall, we found that positive working relationships between officers and their colleagues and the working relationships between officers with prisoners, increased corrections officers' perceptions of safety.

Working relationships with prisoners are paramount for corrections officer safety

Perhaps the most important finding that emerged from our theoretical model was that how officers interact with prisoners affects their safety at work. This finding is not novel; indeed, the Ara Poutama Aotearoa custodial practice manual acknowledges that “sometimes tension exists in delivering security, care and rehabilitation and the way we manage this is through right relationships” (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2017, p. 160). Ara Poutama Aotearoa offer suggestions for managing ‘right relationships’ with prisoners, including being respectful, not crossing boundaries, and being fair (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2017). Our definition of positive working relationships overlaps with how Ara Poutama Aotearoa describes the ‘right relationships’ between officers and prisoners, in that they are characterised as being professional (i.e., not crossing boundaries) and they are built on respect. Our findings are consistent with previous research that found that the working relationships between officers and prisoners were vital for officers to maintain control through dynamic security, rather than physical measures (Eriksson, 2024; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling et al., 2011; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Moreover, in a Canadian study that examined the working personalities of corrections officers, officers

described purposely building a rapport with prisoners as “strategic, tactical efforts to reduce their own risk of being assaulted” (Schultz, 2023, p. 747).

Rapport, ‘bonds’ and communication between officers and prisoners. Because of the power imbalance between corrections officers and prisoners, the working relationships between officers and prisoners better aligned with the concepts of a *working alliance* and *dual role relationships*, compared to the working relationships that officers share with their colleagues. Having a strong bond is a factor of a successful working alliance that can contribute to positive outcomes in prison (e.g., prisoners engaging in treatment, prisoners being less likely to engage in misconduct; Bordin, 1979; Haas & Smith, 2019). In our model, the rapport between officers and prisoners overlapped the concept of therapists and clients having a bond, and how officers interact with prisoners impacts their ability to build a rapport with them. We found that officers used positive properties (i.e., respect, honesty, directness, and using humour) of communication to build a rapport with prisoners; this finding aligns with a Canadian study that officers used honesty and consistency to develop a ‘firm but fair’ communication style that was appreciated by prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Furthermore, a U.S. study that examined the relationship between working alliances and recidivism rates for people on parole found that “clients may view treatment more favorably when mutual respect and communication exists with a supervising officer” (Tatman et al., 2024, p. 936): a finding that also aligns with our subcategory ‘communication’ and the properties that emerged from it (e.g., respect).

In a U.S. study that examined the role of working alliances for offender rehabilitation found that corrections officers are now *required* to engage in building a working alliance with prisoners and need to develop “new, specialized skills in communication” to do so (Haas & Smith, 2019, p 29). This research is pertinent to our findings, and we speculate that these

‘specialized skills’ may overlap considerably with the positive properties of communication (i.e., respect, honesty, directness, and using humour) included in our theoretical model. Taken together, our findings and previous research suggests that using positive properties of communication may facilitate rapport building with prisoners—and therefore strengthen their working alliance—which creates safer outcomes for corrections officers.

Shared goals. Discussed previously, working alliances are formed by having common goals and shared tasks (Gabarro, 1990). The primary goal that is shared by officers and prisoners is maintaining social order within the unit, which in turn, maintains the safety of everyone in the unit (i.e., both officers and staff; Crewe et al. 2015). However, these shared goals may be undermined by the behaviour of officers who do not enforce their power appropriately (Symkovych, 2023). In a study that examined how Ukrainian corrections officers use their power, prisoners wanted officers to use their power adequately to maintain control in the prison, rather than officers under-enforcing rules and prisoners taking power into their own hands, therefore subjecting other prisoners to the “jungle law of survival of the fittest” (Symkovych, 2023, p. 58). We found that some new officers under-enforced rules when they lacked judgement of when it was appropriate to use discretion, and when they attempted to be “yes people” to build positive working relationships with prisoners. However, when considering previous research, when new officers under-enforced rules they damaged their working relationships with prisoners, because officers were not contributing to their shared goal of maintaining safety (Crewe et al., 2015; Symkovych, 2023). When new officers lack skills and experience, their attempts to build positive working relationships with prisoners may be contributing to *negative* working relationships with prisoners, by officers unintentionally undermining their shared goal.

Working alliances and dual role relationships. Because of the mandatory (i.e., involuntary) nature of their interactions, the working relationships between officers and prisoners may also align with the concept of “dual-role relationships” found between probation officers and their clients (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Skeem et al., 2003; Skeem et al., 2007). This finding aligns with the subcategory ‘dual-role balance’ that emerged from our theoretical model, where officers who successfully balanced both facets of their role experienced positive working relationships with prisoners. Our findings of how officers balance these roles also overlap with the work by Skeem and colleagues, by suggesting that the manner in which officers interact (e.g., being friendly, flexible, using humour) with prisoners while conducting their necessary duties can indicate that officers (corrections officers in our research, probation officers in theirs) manage to successfully balance ‘caring’ with ‘control’ (‘managing’ in our research; Skeem et al., 2003).

Cultural differences that impact relationship-building. The extent to which officers engage in building a positive working relationship with prisoners may depend on the culture of their prison. We found that officers recognised the importance of developing positive working relationships with prisoners to increase their safety. This finding aligns with previous research that examined whether officers and prisoners interacted differently across prisons in Norway and Australia (Eriksson, 2024). In this study, officers in prisons with a rehabilitation-focused culture were more likely to emphasise the importance of relationship building (most commonly found in Norwegian prisons; Eriksson, 2024), while in prisons with a traditional security-focused culture (i.e., prisons were for deterrence and community protection) officers adopted more security-focused approaches for maintaining order and control (i.e., strictly adhering to rules rather than relying on dynamic control, commonly found in Australian prisons; Eriksson, 2024). Our

findings more closely align with the Norwegian rehabilitation-focused culture opposed to the security-focused approaches in Australia.

Attitudes towards prisoners. On the other hand, whether officers engage in relationship building with prisoners may also depend on their perspectives of prisoners as a collective. Some international literature identifies an ‘othering’ culture, where corrections officers view prisoners as ‘nightmares’, as ‘evil’, or as inherently different from other people (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Higgins et al., 2022a; Higgins et al., 2023). In some cultures (e.g., Ireland, parts of the U.S.) being a corrections officer is considered “dirty work” (Garrihy, 2022, p. 982) so officers strive to maintain strong boundaries between themselves as “heroes and protectors” and prisoners who are “nightmares” (Higgins et al., 2022a, p. 435, p. 438). Therefore, officers adopt formal methods of control (i.e., strictly enforcing formal rules) rather than engaging in relationship building with prisoners and depending on dynamic control. In contrast to above, we found that the New Zealand officers we interviewed adopted a strong sense of humanity when discussing prisoners and emphasised that prisoners are “still people” and should be treated as such. However, it is important to note that while officers expressed humanising perspectives of prisoners, they did not idealise or sympathise with prisoners. The humanising approach demonstrated by our participants may be the result of Ara Poutama Aotearoa’s strategic focus on humanising the prison environment, which works to “actively recognise and eliminate unconscious bias” (i.e., Hokai Rangi, Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2019, p. 24). On the other hand, this humanising approach may be the result of a shared indigenous cultural identity; more than half of prisoners in New Zealand are Māori (52.5%, Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025) and many of the participants in our sample were Māori. Because of their shared culture, participants in our sample may be less

inclined to view prisoners through an “othering” lens and may have shared interest in increasing positive outcomes for Māori in prison.

Taken together, how officers value their working relationships with prisoners—and therefore the extent to which they may invest in them—may depend on the culture of their prison (e.g., rehabilitation-focused, community protection), the culture of how officers view prisoners (e.g., “othering” culture that accompanies a perspective of “dirty work”) or characteristics of the individual officer themselves (e.g., sharing a culture in common with prisoners).

Working alliances, working relationships, and personal relationships

One major difference between the working relationships officers share with prisoners versus those shared with colleagues is that the working relationships between colleagues have the potential to become *personal relationships*, which cannot occur with prisoners without officers crossing boundaries. Recall that we found some officers described their working relationships with colleagues as a ‘big, blue family’ who were misunderstood by others and who rely on each other because they cannot rely on others outside of their profession. This is an example of officers experiencing an overlap between *working* and *personal* relationships. This finding adds to previous research that suggests corrections officers experience a disconnect between their work and home where they can only talk about work with officers because ‘others’ (i.e., people who are not corrections officers) do not understand their experiences (Higgins et al., 2022b; Johnston et al., 2024). On the other hand, working alliances with prisoners remain strictly professional, with no graduation to personal relationships. If officers do develop personal relationships with prisoners, they may compromise their professionalism and cross professional boundaries. A study that examined the mental health of corrections officers in Canada found that

if officers experience “deep personal relationships” with prisoners, when prisoners become noncompliant officers may “experience a sense of betrayal” (Johnston et al., 2024, p. 3).

The ‘prisoner-colleague-overlap’

We also drew parallels between how officers develop working relationships with prisoners and how they develop working relationships with colleagues. Guided by our theoretical model, we suggest that there may be substantial overlap between the two types of working relationships. Notably, officers used direct and honest communication to develop working relationships with both prisoners and colleagues and identified that having a good sense of humour (i.e., the ability to ‘have a laugh’) can be helpful to build both working relationships.

Recall our finding of the ‘prisoner-colleague-overlap’, where officers’ interactions with prisoners could affect their working relationships with colleagues. From our data, three profiles of overlap emerged: one, positive working relationships with prisoners contributed to positive working relationships with colleagues; two, positive working relationships with prisoners contributed to negative working relationships with colleagues; and three, negative working relationships with prisoners contributed to negative working relationships with colleagues. These three profiles align with previous research. First, officers may prefer to work with colleagues who treat prisoners with respect and who are therefore respected by prisoners, illustrating that positive working relationships with prisoners may contribute to positive working relationships with colleagues (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). Second, Ricciardelli and Perry (2016) found that officers who took a “buddy-buddy” approach (i.e., an overly friendly approach that crossed professional boundaries) to their working relationships with prisoners were perceived negatively and not respected by their colleagues, because their colleagues recognised that crossing boundaries with prisoners undermined the safety of all corrections officers. These findings are

further reflected in a study that examined corrections officers' injuries in the U.S., where officers who engaged in corruption (e.g., officers who smuggled contraband for prisoners) created hostility among their colleagues, because they potentially contributed to "unrelated [corrections officers] or staff members becoming injured" (Goulette et al., 2022, p. 23). Third, officers who treat prisoners disrespectfully or who use 'old school tactics' (e.g., unnecessary aggression, antagonism towards prisoners) may experience poor working relationships with their colleagues because these officers also reduced the safety of officers by unnecessarily escalating situations to the point of physical force (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016).

In previous research a fourth profile of this prisoner-colleague relationship interaction exists, where negative working relationships with prisoners contributed to positive working relationships with colleagues. This profile is grounded in a hypermasculine, 'macho' perspective, where it may be expected for corrections officers to be tough and to treat prisoners disrespectfully to fit in with their colleagues (Einat & Suliman, 2021; Higgins et al., 2022b). Discussed above, in international literature there exists 'us versus them' paradigms between corrections officers and prisoners (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Higgins et al., 2022a; Higgins et al., 2023). New officers may be particularly fearful in the prison environment and seek protection from their colleagues, or socially they may seek to fit in with their colleagues and be "part of the 'us' crowd" to gain protection (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006, p. 182). In a hypermasculine prison environment officers may be expected to exert their power and authority over prisoners to 'belong' with their colleagues. As a result, they may develop poor working relationships with prisoners to develop positive working relationships with their colleagues. We did not find this fourth profile in our research, which suggests that officers did not exert power over prisoners to

be ‘part of the us crowd’ and did not typically express ‘us versus them’ attitudes towards prisoners (described above).

What makes one person feel safe, may make another person feel unsafe

Some participants thought using discretion *increased* their safety, while other participants thought it *decreased* their safety. Previous research also aligns with this conflicted finding, although it is important to note that much previous research operationalises discretion as ‘rule-bending’ or relaxing the rules, rather than a balance of relaxing and enforcing rules (as we have defined in our study). In a U.S. study that examined the causes of corrections officer injuries, some officers relaxed rules to prevent minor incidents from escalating into physical assault (therefore increasing their safety; Goulette et al., 2022). Relaxing rules as a de-escalation tool may also increase officer safety by preventing a cycle of tension between officers and prisoners where officers report minor rule-breaking and prisoners retaliate with violence (Nylander et al., 2011). Relaxing rules may also help officers build and maintain positive working relationships with prisoners, which is vital to keep officers safe because “good relationships with prisoners are [officers’] main tool” (Nylander et al., 2011); a finding that also emerged from our data. Some research even suggests that using discretion is a tool that “the most effective” officers use to build relationships with prisoners and to engage in “peacekeeping” (Schultz, 2023; p. 742). On the other hand, in a study that examined how corrections officers in Canada interpret workplace violence, some officers followed the rules without exception and believed using discretion was frustrating for prisoners (Ricciardelli et al., 2018), therefore reducing the safety of officers; another finding that emerged from our data.

In the current study, officers thought that prisoners valued a ‘firm but fair approach’ where officers behaved consistently (i.e., used discretion consistently or not at all) and prisoners

knew what they could expect from officers. This finding aligns with previous research that suggests that a ‘firm but fair’ approach is an indication that officers use their authority appropriately and is respected by prisoners because it eases confusion about what prisoners can expect from officers (Haas & Smith, 2019; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). However, there are barriers to officers behaving consistently; officers may tighten rules that were previously relaxed based on their professional judgement. For instance, if there is tension in a unit or an incident has recently occurred, officers may tighten rules that were previously relaxed—even if it risks their rapport with prisoners (e.g., not allowing prisoners to keep hair clippers in their room when they previously did). Depending on their judgement, officers must prioritise safety over their rapport with prisoners and may make ‘trade offs’ to ensure their safety.

Unclear role expectations may be challenging for corrections officers to manage

The degree to which corrections officers use discretion may be an example of role ambiguity: a challenge that corrections officers experience when the description of their role may not align with the tasks they are directed to complete. For example, during their initial training corrections officers may learn to operate ‘by the book’ (i.e., strictly follow the formal rules), however, while working with experienced officers, corrections officers may be advised to allow for flexibility when interpreting the formal rules (e.g., turning a blind eye to minor rule infractions). This may be confusing for officers when they are formally trained to report all misconduct they encounter. Role ambiguity (also termed ‘role conflict’) is a job-related factor that may contribute to the level of stress or emotional exhaustion that corrections officers experience (Lambert et al., 2018).

Another example of role ambiguity that emerged from our data was how our participants perceived the dual role of corrections officers (i.e., managing and caring). Officers lack clear

guidelines for how to balance managing and caring which may make it difficult for officers to position themselves on the ‘managing and caring’ spectrum (discussed above, Figure 2).

Previous research aligns with our findings that the dual role is challenging, describing it as a “double commission” that is a “permanent dilemma” for corrections officers (Nylander et al., 2011, p. 469). Further, research that examined the working alliances with offenders found that corrections officers may be required to develop new skills to adapt to this new facet of their role (i.e., new, specialised communication skills to help them effectively interact with prisoners; Haas & Smith, 2019).

Having clear role expectations is important for the wellbeing and safety of corrections officers; corrections officers who feel that their roles (e.g., tasks, expectations of the role) are not clear and officers who experience high job frustration are less likely to feel safe at work and are more fearful of being assaulted by prisoners (Lambert et al., 2018; Stichman & Gordan, 2015). Correctional organisations outline role expectations during initial training with theoretical materials (e.g., custodial practice manuals); however, these expectations may not be enforced by supervisors in practise and may become obscure as officers practice them less and less over time. Correctional organisations may consider implementing practical training to reinforce their expectations of corrections officers, such as by conducting reality-based training where officers are guided through ambiguous scenarios (e.g., what actions are appropriate during interactions with prisoners).

Implications

Our findings contribute to organisational research that examines corrections officer safety by offering first-hand perspectives of violence and safety by corrections officers. Theoretically, our findings extend previous research by suggesting that having positive working relationships

were the most effective tool for keeping officers safe, over and above traditional security-focused measures. Although we do not disregard the necessity and effectiveness of traditional measures, our findings suggest that having positive working relationships increases officer safety by increasing their ability to use dynamic strategies to maintain control in prison (i.e., prisoners are more amenable and compliant when they share a rapport with officers). Our findings also have implications regarding *how* officers could develop positive working relationships (i.e., by being respectful, honest, and direct), which is an important first step when considering how to improve interpersonal relationships between officers and prisoners.

Participants in our study also suggested practical measures that may increase their safety in the workplace. Most consistently, participants identified a need for more frequent and more in-depth training for both physical skills (e.g., control and restraint, pepper spray) and for soft skills (e.g., communication, verbal de-escalation, cultural competency). To reduce the identified deficits in training, Ara Poutama Aotearoa may consider shortening the time between training (i.e., every six months instead of annually) and may extend the length of the refresher training to provide more in-depth training that is contextualised in real-life situations that officers commonly encounter.

Limitations

There were several important limitations to this research. First, using snowball sampling, where participants referred colleagues to the study may have decreased the heterogeneity of perceptions, experiences and values of sample members, because people referred those who may have shared similar experiences and values to them. Therefore, our theoretical model may capture the experiences of a particular group of officers, rather than the full range of corrections officers. Second, although we rigorously adhered to grounded theory methodology during the

analytic process (including adhering to the principles of theoretical saturation), our findings may not be generalisable to corrections officers in other prisons. As discussed above, how corrections officers value their working relationships with prisoners can differ according to the culture of their prison, how corrections officers as a collective view prisoners as a collective, and due to individual differences between officers. In New Zealand, the ‘right relationships’ between corrections officers and prisoners are promoted as being respectful, considerate and within professional boundaries, which was reflected throughout interviews with participants (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2017, p. 160). It is important to consider that the operational definition of the ‘right relationships’ may vary across different cultures and prisons. For example, the ‘right relationships’ in the rehabilitation-focused prisons in Norway may differ from those in more security-focused prisons, such as some prisons in Australia (Eriksson, 2024). Finally, our findings may also not be generalisable to prisons with different prisoner populations. For example, only two corrections officers in our sample had worked in women’s prisons, therefore while their experiences contributed to the theoretical model, our findings more predominantly feature experiences of officers who had worked at men’s prisons. Because prisons operate differently depending on their geographical culture or the population that they house, our findings may not be generalisable to prisons with different purposes, populations or functions.

Future research

We developed a theoretical model of how corrections officers perceive violence and safety in the workplace, and from that model emerged relationships between categories and variables that future research may empirically test. First, future research could examine whether there is a relationship between how corrections officers perceive rule-bending and their perceptions of safety in the workplace. In our research, some officers described relaxing rules

that did not seem to immediately compromise their physical safety (e.g., prisoners wearing incorrect uniform) but it was not clear whether that was a conscious evaluation that officers conducted or whether officers acted instinctively. Future research could also examine officers' decision-making processes when deciding in particular situations which rules can be relaxed, and which cannot. Similarly, future research may also examine how new officers experience the transition between being new and unskilled (e.g., lacking discretion) to becoming experienced officers with an understanding of nuance. Future research may examine how this progression occurs – if it does – for new staff, to understand how to effectively develop the skills of new staff. Conversely, if this progression *doesn't* occur, future research may identify why these officers' skills did not improve and the consequences they may experience as a result (e.g., becoming burnt out, being manipulated by prisoners, being assaulted by prisoners).

Finally, we found that how officers communicated with prisoners impacted their ability to form a positive working relationship with prisoners. We suggest that future research may examine how officers learnt and practised positive communication. Were these skills primarily learnt during their initial training, on the floor while interacting with prisoners, or were they skills already developed before officers were recruited? Did officers use these skills consciously, or if they were instinctive, to what extent can these skills be effectively taught to new officers? By understanding when and how officers learn communication techniques, future research may shape how officers are trained—or recruited—into corrections.

Conclusion

Being a corrections officer is a challenging job that is fraught with physical and emotional risks. How corrections officers perceive their safety, and how they behave at work, may have far-reaching implications for their actual safety and that of their colleagues. Using a

grounded theory approach, we used interviews with 21 corrections officers to develop a theoretical model that examines corrections officer safety in relation to social factors and offer suggestions for future research to expand the implications of our findings further. We demonstrated that officers' perceptions of safety were affected by their working relationships with prisoners and with colleagues. Therefore, it is important that officers are supported to develop positive working relationships in their role to increase their feelings of safety at work and their overall wellbeing as a corrections officer.

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Chapter Five: Strategies corrections officers use to keep safe during interactions with prisoners

Throughout their shift, corrections officers consistently interact with prisoners; these interactions may range from ‘business as usual’ as officers complete the daily regime to instances of conflict where prisoners may be verbally abusive or physically assaultive. There are numerous strategies corrections officers use to keep safe while engaging with prisoners, such as being situationally aware, using verbal de-escalation or using physical restraint. Previous research recognizes the different interactions officers have with prisoners and reports some strategies officers use to keep safe, but to our knowledge, there is no research that examines the overlap between the two. Therefore, in this research, we conducted interviews with 21 corrections officers in New Zealand to examine whether the strategies that officers use to keep safe differ depending on how they engage with prisoners. We also examined the types of risk officers may consider when using strategies and the organizational and individual-level barriers that made it challenging for officers to use strategies.

In New Zealand, physical violence against corrections officers has recently been steadily increasing (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025b; Brabyn et al., 2023). It is vital that corrections officers develop strategies to maintain their safety at work; compared to people in other occupations (e.g., nurses, psychiatric facility staff) corrections officers experience high rates of verbal abuse and physical violence at work (Fayankinnu, 2010; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). As such, officers also sustain high rates of physical injuries (e.g., cuts, bruises, broken bones) largely due to interactions with prisoners (e.g., being physically assaulted by a prisoner, intervening between prisoners fighting; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Konda et al. 2013; Higgins et al., 2023). Compared to other professions, on average corrections officers also take

more days away from work to recover from injury or illness caused by their job (Bierie, 2012; Konda et al., 2013).

Organizational and Environmental Characteristics That Reduce Officer Safety

In addition to their interactions with prisoners, organizational factors (e.g., understaffing, prisoner crowding and prisoner-to-officer ratios) may also contribute to how safe officers feel at work. Officers who think their unit has an inadequate number of officers required to maintain safety and security (i.e., they perceived their unit to be understaffed) tend to feel less safe compared to people who think there are enough officers in their unit (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Similarly, when officers perceive their unit to be crowded (i.e., there are more prisoners than a unit was designed to hold), they may feel less safe because overcrowding contributes to tensions among prisoners who live in chaotic environments (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Steiner, 2009; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020). Finally, in units with higher prisoner-to-officer ratios (i.e., the number of prisoners for each officer and therefore the level of supervision officers have in a unit), officers may feel less safe because they may find it difficult to effectively monitor prisoners, which therefore reduces their capacity to consistently enforce the rules and maintain control over the prisoner population (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013).

Corrections officers may be at particular risk of violence depending on the tasks they are completing. Prisoners may assault corrections officers during routine parts of the daily regime and during tasks that facilitate closer contact between them, such as during movements or searches (Bottoms, 1999; Cashmore et al., 2012; Light, 1991; McNeeley, 2021; O'Donnell & Edgar, 1998). These activities may be “rubbing points” (Bottoms, 1999, p. 265) between officers

and prisoners because prisoners may be resistant to these tasks in the regime (e.g., prisoners may be resistant to being moved to a different unit, prisoners may oppose their cell being searched). On the other hand, prisoners may assault officers in response to officers' behavior, rather than the type of task officers are completing. For example, officers instructing prisoners during interactions or officers charging prisoners for minor rule infractions may also be at increased risk of assault (Bottoms, 1999; Cashmore et al., 2012; Goulette et al., 2022; Light, 1991; McNeeley, 2021). During these interactions, prisoners may be resistant to the behavior of officers because they may feel unfairly treated or feel that officers are unnecessarily asserting their authority over prisoners (Bottoms, 1999; Ricciardelli et al., 2018).

Strategies Officers Use to Keep Safe

There are a variety of tactics and strategies officers use to keep safe at work. Some of these strategies are taught to them during their initial or ongoing professional training, while others are developed 'on the job' (i.e., informally developed as they gain experience in their role). In New Zealand, corrections officers receive ten weeks of training which is spent both off-site at the National Learning Centre and on-site at their allocated prison (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-d). This initial training focuses on officers' soft skills (i.e., skills that help officers interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, such as communication) and practical tactics (e.g., physical control and restraint, use of pepper spray, person and cell searches, administrative tasks). Once officers complete their initial training, they then 'shadow' (i.e., observe) an established officer in their allocated prison to apply their newly developed skills in practice. During this process, officers further develop the practical and soft skills introduced during their initial training, as well as developing new strategies from observing experienced officers that may not be 'by the book' (i.e., experienced officers may enforce rules differently to how they

were taught in their initial training). Throughout their formal training at the National Learning Centre and their informal training shadowing established officers, corrections officers develop strategies to maintain their safety at work.

Situational Awareness

One such skill that officers use to maintain their safety is situational awareness: a skill where officers monitor their surroundings to analyze situations for potential conflict so they may de-escalate situations proactively (rather than waiting for conflict to occur then responding reactively; Dodd et al., 2024; Goulette et al., 2022; Ricciardelli et al., 2018). In previous research, corrections officers used situational awareness to keep safe by recognizing cues that indicated the potential for conflict to occur (e.g., tense body language, verbal abuse) and proactively de-escalated potential conflict before it resulted in physical violence (Dodd et al., 2024; McNeeley, 2021). Brief lapses of situational awareness or a consistent lack of situational awareness (termed ‘complacency’) may increase corrections officers’ risk of being physically assaulted by prisoners (Goulette et al., 2022).

Use of Discretion and Rapport with Prisoners

Another soft skill that officers use to maintain their safety is using discretion, where officers relax or tighten rules depending on different prisoners and different situations (Goulette et al., 2022; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling et al., 2011; Nylander et al., 2011; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Schultz, 2023; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). When using discretion, officers must ‘pick their battles’ and decide which rules must be enforced and which rules they can relax without risking their own safety (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2018). Some officers may choose not to enforce rules they consider unnecessarily restrictive, petty or

mundane (e.g., wearing correct uniform, only being allowed one cup of coffee per break; Ricciardelli et al., 2018, Symkovych, 2023).

Officers may use discretion to keep safe by relaxing some rules to prevent minor conflict from escalating into physical violence (Goulette et al., 2022; Nylander et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). A Canadian study that examined violence towards corrections officers found that some officers began relaxing rules after they were assaulted because they thought they had been targeted for following “institutional protocols too strictly” (Ricciardelli et al., 2018, p. 467). Officers also use discretion as a tool to develop or maintain a rapport with prisoners (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling et al., 2011; Schultz, 2023). Having a rapport and investing in relationship building with prisoners is a skill that “the most effective officers engage in” (Schultz, 2023, p. 742) because these relationships facilitate the use of dynamic security in units. Dynamic security (also termed ‘soft power’) is an informal method of control where officers ‘negotiate power’ with prisoners and share an understanding that prisoners ‘let’ officers have authority on the basis that prisoners may manage the prisoner subculture themselves with minimal interference from officers (Crewe et al., 2011; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling et al., 2011; Nylander et al. 2011; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013; Schultz, 2023).

Verbal De-escalation

Officers may also use communication and verbal de-escalation as a strategy to maintain their safety while interacting with prisoners. A study that examined how corrections officers communicated with prisoners in Canada found that officers preferred to maintain authority and control over prisoners by using a ‘firm but fair’ communication style, that more effectively de-escalated conflict than using physical measures (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Further, a study that examined how corrections officers gained compliance from prisoners in the U.S. found that when

prisoners did not comply with officers, it was more effective and safer for officers to use verbal de-escalation rather than physical force (McNeeley & Donley, 2021).

Physical Measures

Officers also use physical measures (e.g., physical control and restraint, pepper spray) to keep safe during specific interactions with prisoners. For instance, if prisoners attempt to physically assault officers, officers' use of physical force may reduce the likelihood that an assault will be 'completed' (i.e., the prisoner makes actual physical contact with the officer) and therefore reduce the risk that officers are physically injured (McNeeley, 2021). Further, officers may use physical force or chemical irritants (e.g., pepper spray) to ensure their safety during incidents of prisoner physical assault (McNeeley, & Donley, 2021). In New Zealand, corrections officers can use reasonable physical force to control and restrain prisoners if they have "exhausted every effort to defuse a situation peacefully without the need for force" (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c). During these incidents, the force that officers use must be proportionate to the severity of the incident (i.e., officers cannot use physical force against a prisoner who poses no threat to them; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c). In incidents of serious violence, corrections officers may also use pepper spray to subdue prisoners, provided that they have exhausted all other methods of de-escalating the incident or restraining the prisoner (Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005). Although some previous research identifies different interactions officers have with prisoners, and other research examines strategies officers use to keep safe in prison, there is limited research that examines the overlap between these two facets of prison work.

This Study

This research is the second part of a two-part study where we interviewed corrections officers with the aim of understanding how corrections officers construct their personal safety at work and how officers keep safe. Following a grounded theory methodology, we developed two theoretical models and report each separately in the aim of conciseness and clarity. The first model examined whether corrections officers' working relationships with colleagues and with prisoners affected their constructions of personal safety. Relevant to the current study, in our previous model we found that officers having positive working relationships with prisoners increased their perception of safety at work. Particularly, officers' use of discretion with prisoners and the rapport they shared increased officer safety because prisoners were less likely to engage in misconduct when that officer was working and prisoners were more open to being verbally de-escalated by that officer. In the current study, we present the second theoretical model that encapsulates how officers maintain their safety at work and whether the strategies they use to keep safe differ according to their interactions with prisoners. We also discuss factors that may impair an officer's ability to use different strategies (e.g., level of experience, understaffing, prisoner crowding). The aim of this research was to understand the strategies officers used to keep safe at work and to examine whether these strategies changed depending on the intensity of interactions with prisoners. The baseline of intensity of interactions began at neutral interactions (i.e., business as usual) to moderate intensity (i.e., verbal abuse) and high intensity (i.e., physical assault).

Method

This research followed an initial study that examined how corrections officers' working relationships with prisoners and colleagues affected their safety. The current research employed the same methodology as the previous study; for more detailed description of the methodology,

refer to Taaka et al. (2025). To address our aims, we conducted semi-structured interviews with corrections officers and followed a constructivist grounded theory approach, with the intention of developing a theoretical model of how officers kept themselves safe while working with prisoners.

Participants and Interviews

To recruit participants, we initially interviewed corrections officers who participated in a previous project and agreed to be contacted for future research. We then used snowball sampling by asking participants—at the conclusion of their interview—to nominate colleagues who may be open to being interviewed. We interviewed 21 corrections officers who had worked in a prisoner-facing role at any time during their career; some participants ($n = 8$; 38.10%) had progressed to non-prisoner-facing roles by the time they were interviewed (e.g., senior or principal corrections officers, regional managers, special project managers) but most participants were corrections officers ($n = 13$; 61.90%). Most participants were current employees of Ara Poutama Aotearoa ($n = 17$; 80.95%), but we also interviewed people who were previously employed as corrections officers but had left the job within one year of the interview date ($n = 4$; 19.05%). Almost three-quarters of participants were men ($n = 15$; 71.43%), and overall participants ranged in years of experience working for Ara Poutama Aotearoa from 2 years to 47 years ($M = 13.78$; $SD = 11.98$).

We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, using an interview schedule with main topics that helped guide initial interviews and that we systematically added questions to as the data unfolded. Semi-structured interviews allowed for discussion to follow a natural course depending on what each participant elected to speak about. Depending on each participant's preference, we conducted interviews remotely (either by video or phone call) or in-person at a location of their choosing. Interviews on average took one hour and 15 minutes.

Procedure

We followed a constructivist grounded theory approach during data collection and analysis, where data are collected and analyzed concurrently (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This concurrent process allowed for us to systematically update the interview schedule as categories emerged in the analysis process, which we then included in future interviews. We audio recorded all but one interview¹⁴ then uploaded the recording to an automated transcription service. We manually checked each generated transcript for accuracy and sent the checked transcripts back to participants. Once participants confirmed their transcript was acceptable for use, we read each transcript multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data. Following a grounded theory process, we completed the open coding phase by assigning meaning to sections of text (i.e., made codes) using NVivo 14 (release 14.23.2.). We then began axial coding, where we made connections between codes; during this process categories began emerging from the data, which we used to systematically update the interview schedule. We repeated the analysis and interview process until no new codes emerged from the data, and we were confident that further interviews would not further develop emerged categories and no new categories would emerge (therefore reaching theoretical saturation; Favourate, 2020; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then conducted selective coding by integrating all relevant categories and subcategories into an overarching model that explained how corrections officers kept themselves safe during different interactions with prisoners.

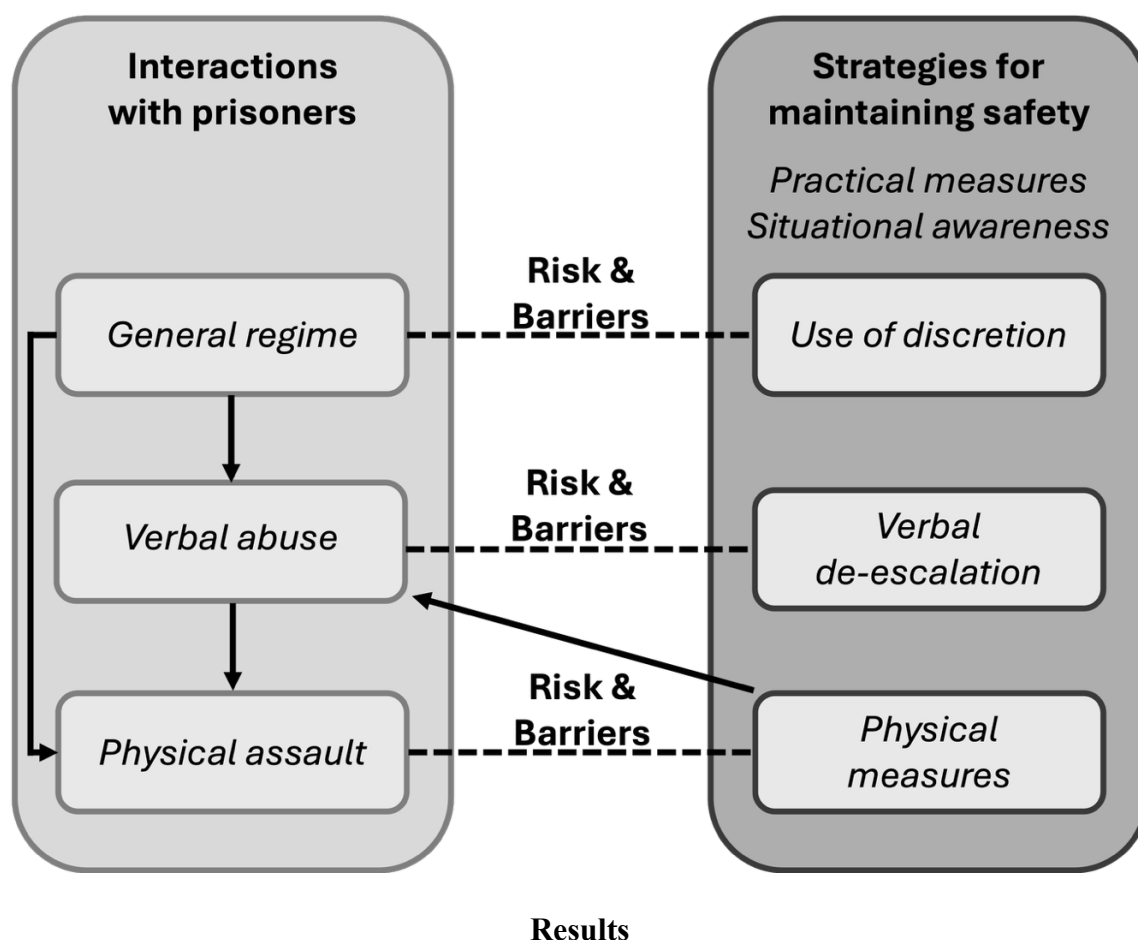
Below, we begin by describing the categories and subcategories of the overarching theoretical model. We discuss the different types of interactions corrections officers had with prisoners and the different strategies officers used to maintain their safety at work. We also

¹⁴ One participant refused to be audio recorded, so we took handwritten notes instead.

describe how participants perceived the risk of using each strategy for their physical and professional safety. Finally, we explain barriers (both occupational barriers such as understaffing and individual characteristics such as an officer's level of experience) that may hinder an officer's ability to use strategies to maintain their safety. To protect the privacy of participants, we have used pseudonyms when reporting direct quotations.

Figure 1.

Summary of theoretical model of strategies officers used to maintain safety during types of interactions with prisoners.



We developed a theoretical model that captured how different types of interactions with prisoners affected the safety of corrections officers, and that also identified the primary strategies

corrections officers used to maintain their safety during those different interactions. There were two categories that captured officers' abilities to use safety strategies: the risks of using strategies, and the barriers hindering their ability to use strategies. Below we explain how we visualized the theoretical model, and describe the categories, subcategories and properties that emerged in the analysis, before going through each section in more detail.

Figure 1 visualizes the categories (**bolded**) and subcategories (*italicized*) of our theoretical model, and Table 1 details the subcategories, properties and dimensions that emerged from each category. Shown in Figure 1, the left-hand side depicts the types of interactions corrections officers had with prisoners and the right-hand side captures the primary strategies officers used during each type of interaction. The arrows between each type of interaction demonstrate how interactions may escalate, and the dashed lines between interactions and strategies visualize barriers that may prevent officers from using each strategy and the risks for officers using that strategy.

Beginning with the types of interactions, 'general regime' captured the routine interactions between officers and prisoners during the completion of daily tasks (i.e., 'business as usual'). These interactions sometimes escalated into 'verbal abuse'— incidents of prisoners verbally abusing officers (e.g., swearing, name-calling, threats). The final type of interaction between officers and prisoners was 'physical assault', reflecting incidents where prisoners used physical violence against corrections officers. 'Physical assault' may escalate from 'verbal abuse' or from general regime interactions (depicted by arrows between the relevant interaction types in Figure 1).

Table 1.

Model Categories and Subcategories, Properties, and Dimensions of Properties Within Each

Category

Category	Subcategory	Property	Dimensions (Safest to least safe)
Interactions with prisoners	General regime	Task-based	
		Proximity	Distant–Close
		Regularity	Routine–Irregular
		Resistance	Low–High
		Interaction-based	
		Prisoner behavior	Compliant–Aggressive
		Officer behavior	Respectful–Antagonistic
		Regularity	Routine–Irregular
		Acceptance	Normal–Unacceptable
	Verbal abuse	Severity	Low–High
		Escalation	Escalated–Random
		Officer contribution	At fault–No contribution
Strategies for maintaining safety	Practical measures	Barriers	Minor–Serious
		Risk	Low–High
		Barriers	Minor–Serious
	Situational awareness	Risk	Low–High
		Barriers	Minor–Serious
		Risk	Low–High
	Use of discretion	Barriers	Minor–Serious
		Risk	Low–High
		Barriers	Minor–Serious
	Verbal de-escalation	Risk	Low–High
		Barriers	Minor–Serious
		Risk	Low–High
	Physical measures	Barriers	Minor–Serious
		Risk	Low–High
		Barriers	Minor–Serious
Risk		Risk	Low–High
		Immediate	Decreased–Increased
		Future	Low–High
Barriers	Officer attributes	Professional	Low–High
		Wellbeing	Well–Unwell
		Skill level	Skilled–Unskilled
		Attitudes	Motivated–Unmotivated
		Prisoner crowding	Low–High
		Understaffing	Low–High
	Prisoner-to-officer ratio	Rapport with prisoners	Good–Poor

Whether officers choose to use strategies, or their effectiveness in implementing each strategy, may escalate or de-escalate the intensity of the interaction. A distinct primary safety strategy emerged at each interaction stage: in order, they were ‘use of discretion’, ‘verbal de-

escalation’, and ‘physical measures’. Figure 1 shows that these strategies are encapsulated within a larger box labelled ‘practical measures’ and ‘situational awareness’, to demonstrate that officers used practical measures and situational awareness as strategies to maintain their safety through *all* types of interactions with prisoners. Finally, horizontal dashed lines connect types of interactions with strategies for maintaining safety during interaction between officers and prisoners. We identified the risk of officers using or not using each strategy and the barriers that reduced an officer’s ability to implement strategies to maintain their safety.

General Regime

Shown in Table 1, we identified five properties of the general regime that affected interactions and whether they escalated: proximity, regularity, resistance, prisoner behavior, and officer behavior. Three of these properties were *task-based* (physical contact, regularity, resistance); they captured aspects of tasks officers routinely completed. Two properties were *interaction-based*; they captured how the behavior of the prisoner and officer shaped their interaction.

During their workday, officers complete tasks that can be positioned on each dimension of the task-based properties (in Table 1). For example, although officers search prisoners routinely, it requires proximity and prisoners may be highly resistant to being rubbed down, generally or on specific occasions. How the officer and prisoner behave during the interaction (i.e., interaction-based properties) may further reduce officer safety. A rub down may be completed smoothly if the prisoner is compliant and if the officer behaves respectfully, but it may escalate to verbal abuse or physical assault if the prisoner or officer’s behavior deviates from the ‘safe’ end of the dimension. Only one of them needs to move away from the ‘safe’ end of the dimension to reduce the officer’s safety; an officer may complete the task respectfully, but

their safety may still be reduced if the prisoner is noncompliant, while a disrespectful officer may elicit aggressive behavior from a prisoner who is usually compliant. Regardless of how different tasks fall on each task-based or interaction-based property dimension, there is always a risk of prisoners using violence against officers. Why prisoners use violence against officers during different tasks in the regime may depend on aspects of the task itself. Two primary profiles emerged: ‘opportunistic’ assaults and ‘reactive’ assaults.

Opportunistic assaults were characterized as officers and prisoners being in close proximity and being routine in regularity. Opportunistic assaults typically happened during tasks in the regime that occurred routinely (e.g., unlock, mealtimes), because prisoners know when they can expect proximity with officers and—if motivated—may take opportunities to use violence. For example, if a prisoner experienced conflict with an officer the previous day, they may use morning unlock as an opportunity to assault the next officer they have contact with. When motivated prisoners use violence during opportunistic assaults, their interaction immediately deviates from the ‘general regime’ to ‘physical assault’ (shown in Figure 1 by an arrow between the ‘general regime’ and ‘physical assault’ interaction types). Officers characterized these assaults as ‘unpredictable’ and ‘out of nowhere’ compared to violence when officers could detect precursors to assault such as verbal abuse (discussed below).

Luke: Sometimes it's just not personal. I knew a mate who, on his first day he got assaulted because he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes this is the chance. That they're kind of like bulls, they see red... well, blue, and you know they just hit the person that's closest to them. So, yeah, sometimes it's not personal.

Reactive assaults occurred during tasks that prisoners often resisted. Reactive assaults occurred during tasks that may vary in regularity; some occur routinely (e.g., lock up, rub

downs) and other tasks may be in response to prisoner behavior or due to officers receiving information (e.g., cell searches). Prisoners may become resistant depending on the invasiveness of the task (e.g., body searches for trauma survivors) or on the negative consequences of the task being successful (e.g., if officers find contraband in cell, prisoners may be charged, lose a valued resource, income or status in prison community). Depending on prisoners' behavior, reactive assaults may *immediately* escalate to physical assault or may *steadily* escalate through verbal abuse to physical assault (Figure 1).

Use of Discretion

Officers used discretion by flexibly relaxing or tightening minor rules for prisoners (both on an individual, case-by-case basis, and across a unit of prisoners), depending on the current environment and their understanding of prisoners' behavior. Officers typically described using discretion as “turning a blind eye” or “brushing things under the carpet”: not enforcing minor rules that did not undermine the safety and security of the prison, but where relaxed enforcement improved prisoners' moods and helped the regime run smoothly (e.g., not disciplining prisoners for having an extra piece of fruit in their room, wearing incorrect uniform). For example, one unit allowed prisoners to keep hair clippers in their room—the formal rule was that hair clippers were kept in the guardroom and issued to prisoners as needed; but if there was tension among prisoners or someone misused the clippers, the rule was again enforced. In a reactive task example, if an officer found a minor item of contraband in a prisoner's cell during a search they might dispose of it and give the prisoner a verbal warning rather than formally reporting the incident.

Danielle: You have to brush things under the carpet sometimes.

Officers contrasted using discretion around minor rules with the alternative approach—consistently ‘nit-picking’ at prisoners (i.e., strictly enforcing even minor rules). The latter reduced their individual safety because prisoners were more likely to get frustrated and physically assault those officers. Strict enforcement reduced the safety of all officers by creating tension among officers and prisoners which made it difficult to conduct the daily general regime; prisoners disrupted the regime in response to what they saw as unnecessarily rigid enforcement by being oppositional or confrontational and officers then spent time de-escalating. Some officers felt safer when they used discretion during prisoner resistant tasks (e.g., person or cell searches); by ‘turning a blind eye’ to minor rule infractions, officers maintained their own safety. However, it is important to note that although some officers thought using discretion made them safer during reactive tasks, other officers strongly condemned this process of “cutting corners” because it decreased the likelihood that officers would detect potential danger (e.g., shanks during person searches, drugs during cell searches) and suggested that officers may also ‘shortcut’ tasks to avoid confrontation with prisoners.

Luke: And there's some guys that take shortcuts. You know, just even simple things like giving rub downs, you give them a rubdown and make sure they're not carrying anything they shouldn't carry. It's easy for staff to take a shortcut. Just take them to the yard and, you know, let the prisoners say, "Oh no, I don't rub down." And they let them go, instead of saying, "Yes, you do" because they don't like the conflict, because they never had to deal with the conflict.

Verbal Abuse

The next type of interaction that may escalate from the general regime is ‘verbal abuse’ (Figure 1), with three properties: ‘regularity’, ‘acceptance’ and ‘severity’ (Table 1). ‘Regularity’

captured how often officers were subjected to verbal abuse, from ‘routine’ to ‘irregular’.

‘Acceptance’ encapsulated how normalized it was, ranging from ‘normal’ to ‘unacceptable’.

‘Severity’ captured the degree to which officers thought verbal abuse could escalate into physical assault, ranging from ‘low’ (e.g., prisoners name-calling officers while locked in their cell) to ‘high’ (e.g., prisoners explicitly threatening to harm officers).

Participants described verbal abuse—being called insulting names, sworn at, and threatened—as a routine occurrence (i.e., high in ‘regularity’); some officers were verbally abused daily. A relationship emerged between officers’ acceptance of verbal abuse and their gender. Men typically accepted verbal abuse as the ‘language’ of prisons and as a normal part of the job. Women acknowledged the regularity of verbal abuse in prison but expressed less accepting perspectives: that verbal abuse should not be normalized and it was the responsibility of officers to let prisoners know that that behavior was unacceptable. Officers’ responses to verbal abuse depended on how serious they considered it to be. Typically, they just ‘brushed off’ (i.e., dismissed or ignored) the frequent, low severity abuse. Higher severity incidents (e.g., explicit threats) by definition were judged as having potential to escalate toward physical assault and therefore led to strategies to maintain their safety.

Verbal De-escalation

The primary strategy used for higher severity verbal incidents was verbal de-escalation techniques. Officers made judgements in the moment—but based on previous training and experience—about whether verbal de-escalation could be successful, depending on the presentation of the prisoner (e.g., if they were very aggressive or upset) and other contextual factors (e.g., whether other prisoners were present). Successfully using verbal de-escalation maintained both the *immediate* and *future* safety of officers in different ways. For their

immediate safety, it reduced the likelihood of needing to use physical measures that risked injury. Considering *future* safety, successful verbal de-escalation eased tension in a unit for some time afterwards (while physical measures had the opposite effect). Communication and verbal de-escalation were regarded as the preferred, most effective tool for keeping safe during prisoner interactions, and was reported to be successful in restoring safety most of the time.

Michelle: My weapon of safety, I carry it with me. It's here <gestures to mouth>. And I've always said that. This is my best weapon of defence. One of our specialties is our communication skills, our situational awareness. If we have those skills, and we use them correctly, we're safe.

Officers might judge that verbal de-escalation would be more successful if they knew the prisoner and shared a rapport with them. But regardless, there was always a risk that verbal abuse could escalate into physical assault. Officers attempting to use verbal de-escalation sometimes upset prisoners further and actually escalated the interaction to physical assault. However, during these situations, officers may proactively use physical measures to prevent prisoners from assaulting them (illustrated in Figure 1 by an arrow from ‘physical measures’ to ‘verbal abuse’).

Physical Assault

Officers described most assaults by prisoners as “unpredictable” and “out of nowhere”. For assaults that were considered predictable, two properties emerged that captured the predictability of a prisoner assaulting an officer: ‘escalation’ and ‘officer contribution’. Violence that escalated from verbal abuse during an interaction with the officer was considered more predictable than other assaults.

Discussed previously, depending on the severity of verbal abuse by prisoners, officers considered verbal abuse a sign that their interaction may escalate to physical violence. Therefore,

assaults were *more predictable* when they followed a period of increased intensity (compared to incidents that “came out of nowhere”). When assaults were more predictable officers had some opportunity to use preventative measures to attempt to minimize the harm caused by violence (e.g., verbal de-escalation, increasing the distance between themselves and the prisoners), which therefore helped officers maintain their safety. However, officers considered most incidents of violence unpredictable, which suggested that they did not detect signs of the interaction escalating or that the prisoner used violence immediately upon contact with the officer (e.g., the prisoner assaulted the officer immediately after being unlocked).

Jaimee: It happened so fast, it's just... You can stand in front of the prisoner, and all of a sudden he will just lash out at you. Hit you. So it's, it's seconds that it happens. Like the last one, the guy worked with me, when they opened a cell he was rubbed-down and he just turned around, and hit him on his face. He cracked his eye socket.

Interviewer: So pretty unpredictable?

Jaimee: Yeah, that's, that's normally when it happens. It just happens.

Assaults that officers contributed to were also more predictable than assaults where officers had no obvious contribution. Officers could contribute to an interaction escalating to violence in two ways: *immediately* or *distally*. *Immediately*, interactions could escalate if an officer behaved disrespectfully during the interaction (e.g., they behaved unsympathetically or antagonistically, they did not attempt verbal de-escalation or did but lacked skill) which could anger prisoners. *Distally*, how officers interacted with prisoners previously (e.g., unsympathetically, antagonistically, being ‘nit-picky’) may contribute to an interaction escalating because the prisoner and officer lacked a rapport based on these previous negative interactions. Most officers who had been physically assaulted by a prisoner thought that they had no

contribution to the incident occurring but rather that they were in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’. Incidents that the officer did not contribute to (immediately or distally) were considered ‘random’; the prisoner assaulted whoever was nearest and did not purposely select a target.

Only one officer thought that he had been targeted by a prisoner, but he believed it was due to his ethnicity and not about him personally because he did not know the prisoner before the assault. Other participants described being assaulted while intervening in incidents where violence was already occurring (e.g., prisoners fighting, backing up a colleague in an incident); therefore they were not the intended victim of the original violence.

How officers viewed the predictability of assault and whether the victim had any contribution to the incident differed according to whether *they* were the victim, or *a colleague* was the victim. When officers were assaulted by prisoners, they described the assault as “coming out of nowhere”. By contrast, when their colleagues were assaulted by prisoners, officers often described a fault of their colleague that contributed to the assault. In both cases it is possible that sometimes officers missed signs that an assault was imminent. But only assaults on colleagues were seen to have predictable causes, which may sometimes have been observed at the time (i.e., when the colleague was assaulted in the presence of the officer), but otherwise were proposed in hindsight to explain the colleague’s victimization, such as the colleague behaving disrespectfully towards prisoners, or not “keeping their word” with prisoners, or unsuccessfully trying to verbally de-escalate an incident.

Physical Measures

During interactions of physical assault officers used physical measures to maintain their safety that were intended to be proportionate in force to the harm that prisoners were inflicting. If verbal de-escalation was not successful, officers described primarily using physical force to

restrain aggressive prisoners to maintain their safety during incidents of violence. However, where physical force was unable to be used or was unsuccessful (e.g., if there were not enough officers to complete the approved control techniques, the prisoner was highly aggressive and could not be physically restrained) and other methods of de-escalation had proven unsuccessful (e.g., verbal de-escalation), officers used pepper spray to maintain their safety¹⁵. Officers considered using physical measures a ‘last resort’. They put officers at risk of physical injury; some participants described feeling scared or unsafe when using them. Using physical measures against prisoners was also upsetting for officers because it contradicted their humanizing attitudes toward prisoners; some officers expressed concern that prisoners could also be harmed when officers used physical measures.

Overarching Strategies for Maintaining Safety

Practical Measures

Shown in Figure 1, across all types of interactions with prisoners, officers used practical measures and situational awareness to maintain their safety. Practical measures (e.g., ensuring their equipment was in working order before starting their shift, keeping fit and healthy, working in pairs, tying up long hair so it couldn’t be grabbed) were routine steps that kept officers safe and well-prepared on shift. Women also spoke of walking behind prisoners to reduce the risk of being inappropriately touched.

Situational Awareness

Officers considered situational awareness (also termed ‘being alert’ or being ‘switched on’) as the most important strategy they used to maintain their own safety and the safety of their

¹⁵ According to section 83 of the Corrections Act 2004 and the Corrections Regulations 2005, officers may use pepper spray “if there are grounds to believe the use of it is reasonable, necessary, and proportionate in the circumstances.” Pepper spray must not be used if the incident can be resolved through other means (e.g., physical measures, verbal de-escalation).

colleagues around prisoners. Situational awareness is a state of monitoring surroundings and analyzing situations to identify potential problems at the earliest possible point, so they can promptly and efficiently pre-empt conflict or violence. Officers described needing to be situationally aware of potential hazards during both the general regime, and during incidents of violence (i.e., verbal abuse and physical assault; watching to ensure other prisoners nearby didn't join in). Some officers described needing to be more "switched on" around prisoners with histories of aggression (e.g., higher security prisoners) and prisoners who could be unpredictable (e.g., younger prisoners, remand prisoners).

Jade: [We need to] be aware all the time. That is what we call situational awareness, we have to know all the time what's going on. So if a group of prisoners are playing up or there's some tension building up between a particular prisoner and the staff for some reason, we have to know it and then deal with [it] accordingly.

Although most officers cited situational awareness as an important skill they consistently used to keep safe, a few officers described having difficulty 'turning it off' outside of work (e.g., at home, out in public) which was described as exhausting and stressful.

Risk

Shown in Figure 1, officers considered the risk of using safety strategies during interactions with prisoners. Risk had three subcategories: 'immediate', 'future', and 'professional' risk (Table 1). Immediate risk referred to the likelihood that prisoners would verbally abuse or physically assault officers during their current interaction. Future risk captured the likelihood that an officer's actions during the current interaction would decrease their safety in the future by prisoners either manipulating them or physically assaulting them. Professional

risk referred to whether officers would be reprimanded by supervisors or lose social standing among colleagues for using a particular safety strategy.

Officers described using professional judgement to consider and prioritize each type of risk when they could. But when incidents escalated very rapidly or occurred ‘randomly’, officers described making ‘snap judgements’, and ‘instinctively’ using strategies; only reflecting on their decision-making retrospectively. Only a few officers described consciously considering the risk of each strategy if the incident escalated quickly.

Discretion and Risk

When deciding whether to use discretion with prisoners, officers considered each type of risk involved. Officers described incidents where they prioritized one type of risk; but officers may then be vulnerable to another type. For example, an officer may prioritize their *immediate safety* from prisoner aggression by ‘shortcutting’ a search (e.g., not thoroughly conducting the search). But shortcutting a body search may reduce their future safety because they fail to detect drugs or weapons. On the other hand, some officers prioritized their *future safety* by not relaxing minor rules because of concern that this discretionary action could lead to prisoners expecting similar favorable treatment in the future, or might even threaten to expose a staff member in the future for their actions. But by prioritizing their future safety, their immediate safety may be reduced because of prisoner frustration.

Luke: I've had this principal corrections officer saying, "Is it worth rolling around on ground for?" You know? Sometimes you challenge a prisoner and they'll start fighting back, and it might be over something small that you can use your discretion for, and officers will say that to me, and I said, "Yeah, but if you use that discretion now, what's

the next big thing they want to get away with? What's the next big thing you get away with?"

Finally, some officers used discretion when they judged their professional reputation would not be compromised by doing so. They sought to avoid the risk of negative appraisals by colleagues and reprimands from supervisors for their actions. If officers considered their professional safety at risk, they more closely enforced rules 'by the book' (i.e., the official custodial manual) to minimize risk of professional harm. Some officers minimized professional risk by not enforcing minor rules based on those they saw being relaxed by colleagues or supervisors. Although there were differences between officers in how they prioritized different facets of their safety when using discretion, officers did not report relaxing rules that they thought would directly harm themselves, their colleagues, or prisoners.

Verbal De-escalation and Risk

When considering whether to use verbal de-escalation, officers typically prioritized their immediate safety over their future or professional safety. Both policy and senior officers supported and encouraged their use of verbal de-escalation as preferred over physical measures; there was limited future or professional risk in officers using verbal de-escalation to maintain their safety. Officers made professional judgements as to whether verbal de-escalation techniques could successfully resolve the situation, by weighing up the prisoner's mood, their rapport with the prisoner and other situational factors (e.g., whether other prisoners were present). If officers thought any contributing factors suggested the risk to their immediate safety outweighed the likelihood of success (e.g., if a prisoner is very aggressive or their aggressiveness is escalating), officers may escalate their response to physical measures to reduce the risk to their immediate safety.

Physical Measures and Risk

Officers' use of physical measures is governed by legislation (Corrections Act, 2004); officers used physical measures proportionate to the seriousness of the incident. In doing so, officers considered both their immediate safety and professional safety. Officers evaluated whether using physical measures was the only—or last—option for de-escalation. Officers also considered whether they could justify their use of force to colleagues and superiors (i.e., it was in alignment with Ara Poutama Aotearoa's use of force policy¹⁶). Potential consequences of 'getting it wrong' (e.g., using a disproportionate amount of force) included damaging their reputation and being judged by colleagues (e.g., their colleagues may view them as weak or unskilled for using physical measures rather than verbal de-escalation techniques), being 'grilled' by superiors (i.e., extensively questioned), or even losing their job. In some cases, officers thought they were justified to use physical force but were unsure whether their management would agree and feared disciplinary action, regardless of their justification. Although officers commonly had to decide very rapidly whether to use physical measures, they reported that they still considered their professional safety and acted in proportion to the incident severity.

Barriers

Barriers impeded officers' ability to use—or assess the risk of using—safety strategies. Shown in Table 1, there were two subcategories: 'officer attributes' and 'prisoner-to-officer ratios'.

Officer Attributes

¹⁶According to Ara Poutama Aotearoa (n.d.-c), "force can only be used once prison staff have exhausted every effort to defuse a situation peacefully without the need for force. The use of force is limited to the minimum degree reasonable and necessary to resolve a situation as promptly and as safely as possible. It can only be used if there are reasonable grounds to believe the use of force is necessary."

Characteristics of officers that might impact their ability to complete their duties included both durable and dynamic factors. An officer's skill was a durable factor that remained relatively stable across situations and time. The wellbeing of officers and their attitude towards their work were described as dynamic factors that changed throughout each shift; for example, an officer may become fatigued, with lower wellbeing, towards the end of their shift, and an officer's attitude may fluctuate throughout their shift depending on interactions with prisoners, colleagues and supervisors.

Officers who were in good physical health, who were highly skilled, and highly motivated described a capacity to be more situationally aware (and therefore keep themselves and colleagues safe) compared to officers who were in poor physical health, were less skilled, and were unmotivated in their job. When officers were physically exhausted or unwell (e.g., burnt out, experiencing chronic illness) they may lack the stamina required to be consistently situationally aware, reducing their contribution to safety. Similarly, officers varied in their ability to maintain situational awareness; less experienced staff might experience lapses in awareness when other tasks required their full attention. Officers also described some more experienced colleagues who showed reduced situational awareness because of either (a) complacency, and comfort in their role, or (b) cynicism, where jaded experienced officers did not consider it worthwhile expending effort above and beyond what was necessary.

Taylor: It took a while to process, but it's something like that I can see now, why some [officers] that were around in that time were so airhead-like, so complacent. They're just not aware. Or they just don't care anymore.

Prisoner-to-officer Ratios

Higher prisoner-to-officer ratios were reported to reduce officer safety when the number of prisoners per officer exceeded the capacity of an officer's ability to monitor situations effectively (i.e., their situational awareness was compromised by excessive external demands). The result can be that officers react to situations only as they unfold, rather than being proactive and intervening to potentially prevent conflict from arising or escalating. Higher prisoner-to-officer ratios also made it harder to provide "back-up" for colleagues as it was needed. 'Crowding' and 'understaffing' were properties that increased prisoner-to-officer ratios, by increasing tensions among prisoners, increasing officer work demands, and reducing officers' ability to develop a rapport with prisoners.

Prisoner crowding was associated with units and cells retrofitted to house more prisoners than the original design, reducing space in cells and common areas such as exercise yards. Crowding may contribute to tension between prisoners in a unit, *directly* reducing officer safety because prisoners may 'take it out' on staff (e.g., by physically assaulting staff) or *indirectly* when staff intervene between prisoners fighting and get hurt in the process. Crowding may be managed by only unlocking small groups of prisoners at a time into the common space, keeping all others locked up (i.e., running 'shifts' of recreation time). Running multiple 'shifts' in this way can ease prisoner tensions by preventing conflict that arises from some prisoners spending too much time together but may increase prisoners' frustrations by reducing the time each prisoner is out of the cell. It may increase officer work demands because officers must keep track of which prisoners are unlocked, and complete the unlock and lock-up process multiple times.

Like crowding, understaffing may reduce officer safety by increasing tensions between prisoners and officers, and increasing officer work demands. First, understaffing reduces the ability for officers to work in pairs for tasks where more prisoners are unlocked at once (e.g.,

recreation time), which also decreases their safety; situational awareness is reduced by being limited to “one pair of eyes”. Second, prisoners’ unlocked time is reduced so that officers can safely supervise unlocked prisoners while also completing other necessary tasks in the general regime (e.g., movements, visits). Finally, during their shift officers also attend to requests from prisoners (e.g., property requests, phone number approvals). Prisoners have less time to make these requests and there are fewer officers to respond to them which may also increase prisoner frustrations. When units are understaffed over a sustained period, although officers prioritize prisoners’ minimum daily entitlements, other individual prisoner needs may go unmet for some time, which may lead them to direct frustration toward officers.

Joseph: The more staff we have, the easier it is. But when there's less than [there] should be because people have called in sick and there's no one to replace them... yeah, it's stressful those days. And it's annoying for the prisoners because nothing gets done because there's no staff, and that's where we get our bad situations.

Both crowding and understaffing also impede officers’ abilities to develop a rapport with prisoners. Having a rapport with prisoners is advantageous to making judgements about how to handle situations where safety could be compromised. When units are crowded with prisoners or understaffed, officers have less time to invest in building positive working relationships with prisoners. As a result, officers may not know the prisoners well enough to make these judgements, or to use that rapport as a tool for de-escalation, therefore increasing the risk that conflict may escalate to physical assault. These officers tended to use formal control (i.e., strict rule enforcement) than the dynamic security approach that most officers preferred.

Officers described the attributes of other officers and prisoner-to-officer ratios as barriers to their ability to perform their duties effectively; however, there was limited discussion about

how officers managed their safety in the face of these barriers. Most officers shared the sentiment: that they “just get on with it”. Officers acknowledged that there were deficits in their working environment that reduced their safety but recognized that there was no easy solution to reduce these barriers, so they “made it work”.

Elsie: It's difficult. So we wind up with... you know the old saying that you go to war with the army you've got, not the army you want. So we get what we've got. And we have to make it work with what we've got.

Discussion

In this research, we interviewed 21 corrections officers and adopted a grounded theory approach with the aim of understanding the strategies corrections officers used to maintain their safety in prison and how officers used different strategies depending on the intensity of their interactions with prisoners. We found there was a relationship between the intensity of interactions between officers and prisoners, and the intensity of strategies officers used to maintain their safety: as interactions with prisoners escalated, so did the intensity of the strategies officer used to keep safe. During the general regime officers commonly used discretion—allowing some relaxation of minor rules—while interacting with prisoners to manage their safety; during interactions of verbal abuse officers primarily used verbal de-escalation techniques to keep safe; and during interactions of physical violence by prisoners towards officers, officers used physical measures to maintain their safety. Throughout all their interactions with prisoners—and even while not interacting with prisoners—officers consistently used practical measures and situational awareness to keep safe.

Officers Used Strategies Proportionate to the Intensity of the Interaction

In New Zealand, corrections officers are guided to respond to incidents with measures that are proportionate to the severity of the incident and must only use physical measures once they have exhausted all other strategies to de-escalate the incident (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-c; Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005); our findings align with this custodial policy. There were occasions when officers described using physical measures against prisoners proactively (i.e., before a prisoner physically assaulted an officer), however, these incidents were seen to align with custodial policy because officers had attempted to use other strategies to de-escalate the incident (e.g., verbal de-escalation) and had deemed the prisoner to be at risk of seriously harming others. How corrections officers respond to interactions with prisoners shares considerable overlap with how New Zealand Police train police officers to make decisions regarding the use of physical force. The New Zealand Police are guided by the Tactical Options Framework (TOF) to “only use force that is necessary and proportionate, given all the circumstances known at the time” (New Zealand Police, 2020). Although corrections officers and police officers are governed by different legislation (i.e., corrections officers by the Corrections Act 2004 and Corrections Regulations 2005, police officers by the Crimes Act 1961) both are guided to only use physical force when necessary to the situation, in proportion to the intensity of the situation, and when the situation cannot be resolved in another, less violent manner (Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005; Crimes Act, 1961; New Zealand Police, 2020).

Although we found that the actions of officers in our research aligned with custodial policy and the guidelines found in similar occupations in New Zealand (i.e., the New Zealand Police), the same is not always true in previous research. For instance, a study that examined

how Ukrainian corrections officers used power found that officers “used legal force rarely” (i.e., legally sanctioned physical measures such as control and restraint; Symkovych, 2023, p. 69) but using illegal force was “not unusual” (e.g., hitting a prisoner with their baton; Symkovych, 2023, p. 69). Officers typically used illegal force against prisoners for organizational reasons: understaffing meant that using legal control and restraint would require more officers than available, and using legal force would increase their administrative tasks (e.g., paperwork; Symkovych, 2023). Interestingly, these officers thought that prisoners also preferred “this informal punishment” because being formally punished could mean their visits were cancelled or their parole was delayed (Symkovych, 2023, p. 69).

Although in this research officers acknowledged the importance of having the confidence to use physical skills when required, they agreed that verbal de-escalation was their “best tool” to maintain their safety. This finding aligns with previous research, including a Canadian study that examined how corrections officers perceived threats, where officers thought “words were [their] optimal choice of weapon” (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013, p. 110) and a U.K. study that described communication as the “most prized skill” officers drew on to navigate their interactions with prisoners (Liebling & Kant, 2018, p. 210). Officers in our study preferred using communication to maintain their safety because there was minimal future or professional risk to them for using verbal de-escalation (i.e., they were unlikely to be targeted for future assaults or reprimanded by supervisors for using verbal de-escalation). On the contrary, using verbal de-escalation increased officers’ immediate safety by reducing the risk that they “roll around on the ground with prisoners” and increased their future safety by managing tensions in the unit (e.g., when officers use control and restraint it could cause tensions in the unit if prisoners thought officers unnecessarily used physical measures). Further, using verbal de-escalation meant that officers

could prevent conflict with prisoners escalating into physical violence; officers thought that the number of incidents they prevented escalating to physical violence far outweighed the number of incidents that did turn violent. This finding reflects recent work by Rodriguez and colleagues (2024), who found that officers using communication were successful in resolving most conflict with prisoners before it could escalate to violence.

Officers in our study described two overarching strategies they used to maintain their safety: practical measures and situational awareness. One example of a practical measure that officers in our study used to maintain their safety at work was regularly exercising to be fit and healthy in preparation for work. Although participants in our study thought being physically fit kept them safe at work, they primarily described exercise as a way to ‘blow off steam’ and destress after work. In previous research by Ricciardelli and Gazso (2013), corrections officers also described regularly exercising in their personal lives to ensure their physical safety at work. However, in contrast to our participants, their participants considered exercise a tool they purposefully used to be “non-vulnerable” (i.e., to gain muscle mass and strength, Ricciardelli & Gazso 2013, p. 110) and to garner the respect of prisoners (rather than as a stress-relief tool).

In our research, women described strategies that kept them safe over and above the strategies that all corrections officers typically used, such as tying up their hair and never walking in front of prisoners. Again, this finding supports earlier research that women officers tend to feel less safe at work and may take additional measures to keep themselves safe compared to men (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Gordon et al., 2003). In previous research, women described an increased need for situational awareness and maintaining professional boundaries with prisoners to ensure that prisoners do not perceive any communication as flirting or overly friendly (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Our findings extend previous research by identifying

practical measures that women use to keep safe in prison, in addition to the soft skills described above.

Recall that situational awareness is a skill that officers use to analyze situations and interpret information to respond to situations effectively. Although officers considered situational awareness essential for keeping safe at work, some officers also described having difficulty ‘turning it off’ (i.e., relaxing and being less alert). As such, officers experienced long periods of high alertness. In previous research that examined the relationship between corrections officers’ experiences of assault and burnout, officers reported high levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout caused by extended periods of high stress (Boudoukha et al., 2013). Although officers used situational awareness to maintain their safety at work, as illustrated above, long periods of situational awareness may have a detrimental impact on officers’ wellbeing. Further, if officers persistently have difficulty ‘turning off’ their situational awareness outside of work, they may also find it difficult to establish boundaries between work and their personal life, where the strategies that keep them safe at work are actually detrimental to their personal life (e.g., social isolation from family, hyper-alertness; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022b; Johnston et al., 2024). Although officers in our study cited situational awareness as an overarching strategy they used to keep safe at work, previous research suggests that long periods of situational awareness and a lack of boundaries between officers’ work-related skills and their home life can have negative consequences on officers’ emotional and social wellbeing. Taken together, these findings suggest that it may benefit officers to take regular breaks from prisoner-facing tasks (i.e., by completing administrative tasks) or to establish firm boundaries between work and home (e.g., officers may use physical or environmental cues to signal that their work is over, such as taking off their vest or driving home).

Who is Responsible for Assault?

Of the participants in our study who had been physically assaulted by a prisoner, all thought that they did not contribute to being assaulted; rather, officers considered themselves a convenient target that was most accessible to the prisoner and attributed their assault to their being “in the wrong place, at the wrong time”. This finding aligns with previous research that suggests some assaults against officers are “random and spur of the moment”, seemingly motivated by prisoners who were angry about being “deprived of their freedoms” ‘lashing out’ against any officer (Goulette et al., 2022, p. 47) However, an interesting finding that emerged from our research was that while officers thought they did not contribute to their *own* assault, they thought their *colleagues* who had been assaulted did contribute to the assault occurring.

Officers were skeptical about why that colleague was assaulted instead of another officer and thought they must have contributed to their assault in some degree. These findings may be explained by victim-blaming research that suggests that victims may have a part in their own victimization (Niemi & Young, 2016). In a correctional context, when officers are assaulted their colleagues may attribute that assault to the officer’s behavior and consider the officers as responsible in some way for being assaulted. These findings share similarities with belief in a just world (BJW) literature, where people blame victims for an incident when they perceive that victim to “get what they deserve” (Niemi & Young, 2016, p. 1238). When crime occurs, people speculate why it happened: from a BJW perspective, people may soothe themselves by attributing responsibility to the victim and their behavior (Otto & Dalbert, 2004). Because the world is ‘fair’ and ‘just’, people may blame victims for being perpetrated against to convince themselves that they are safe because they would never behave in a way that would risk them being perpetrated against (Otto & Dalbert, 2004). In a prison context, officers may consider their

colleagues being assaulted as ‘getting what they deserve’, either by behaving disrespectfully towards prisoners or by lacking skills required to detect signs that prisoners may escalate into aggression (i.e., situational awareness). By adopting a BJW mentality, officers may develop a (perhaps false) sense of security that their actions towards prisoners do not warrant them being assaulted so therefore they will not be assaulted. From a BJW perspective officers may have a “confidence that they will be treated fairly by others and not fall victim to unforeseen disaster” (Otto & Dalbert, 2004, p. 154), perhaps making them feel safer while working in prison—regardless of whether it is true or not.

Organizational Factors may Reduce Officer Safety Through a Deprivation Lens

Some barriers that prevented officers from effectively using strategies to maintain their physical safety may also have a detrimental impact on officers’ emotional wellbeing. Prisoner-to-officer ratios, prisoner crowding, and understaffing were all barriers that reduced officer safety by reducing an officer’s capacity for situational awareness, therefore reducing officers’ ability to prevent incidents or proactively interact with prisoners. These organizational factors may also reduce the psychological wellbeing (e.g., emotional and physical exhaustion, depression and anxiety symptoms) of officers through increased stress and increased workloads. Regarding understaffing, our findings agree with previous research that found officers in understaffed units felt less safe and reported higher levels of stress (Clements & Kinman, 2021; Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017). Understaffing may contribute to unreasonable workloads (e.g., high job demands) because officers complete the same amount of work with fewer corrections officers to distribute necessary tasks. Officers who experience higher job demands report being more stressed (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015), feeling less safe (Ellison & Gainey, 2020; Haynes

et al., 2020; Stichman & Gordan, 2015), experiencing higher rates of psychological consequences (e.g., emotional exhaustion, feelings of depression, anxiety, and irritability; Clements & Kinman, 2021; Kinman et al., 2017), and have greater odds of being physically assaulted by prisoners (Ellison & Gainey, 2020).

Our findings also align with previous research that posits an interaction between understaffing and the lack of resources that prisoners experience (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Being in prison, prisoners suffer from the ‘pains of imprisonment’ where they lose freedoms such as their personal autonomy, safety and security, and access to goods and services (i.e., deprivation theory; Sykes, 1958). Because prisoners experience these losses (e.g., the restriction of their autonomy and ability to fulfil their own needs), they depend on corrections officers to attend to their needs. When units are understaffed or when the prisoner population is above the intended capacity, officers cannot reasonably attend to the needs of all prisoners every day, while still ensuring the regime runs punctually and other essential tasks (e.g., muster checks) are done. As a result, prisoners may have to wait longer for requests to be processed (e.g., approving phone numbers, receiving property) or there may be delays in receiving services (e.g., medical or dentist visits, meetings with case managers or lawyers). Another ‘pain of imprisonment’ is the lack of privacy that prisoners experience, which is exacerbated by prisoner crowding. Due to periods of muster increase in New Zealand, units and cells have been retrofitted to house more prisoners than they were originally designed for. As of June 2024, 41% of all people in prison in New Zealand shared a cell with another prisoner (i.e., ‘double bunking’; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2024b); this proportion varies across prisons, with some prisons not using double bunking, while in other prisons, more than two fifths of prisoners have a cell mate (Rāketē, 2024). When prisons use double bunking to manage prisoner crowding, prisoners have almost no privacy at any point

in their day (both from other prisoners and from staff), which may make “confinement intolerable” (Rākete, 2024). For prisoners, crowding is associated with lower wellbeing (e.g., higher likelihood in engaging in self-harming behavior, higher suicide rates; Baggio et al., 2018; van Ginneken et al., 2017) and increased tensions, contributing to tense and unpredictable environments (Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Wildeman et al., 2018). Increased tensions among prisoners may reduce officer safety because prisoners are more frustrated and therefore more likely to lash out at officers, but also because officers need to intervene in more fights between prisoners, and risk being harmed while doing so (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). Understaffing or crowding (or both together) may contribute to the deprived conditions of prison, which then may contribute to higher rates of serious violence by prisoners towards officers (Bierie, 2012). Through a deprivation lens, understaffing and crowding reduce officer safety by increasing the pains of imprisonment and decreasing prisoners’ abilities to reduce those pains and therefore the behavior prisoners use to overcome these pains (Bierie, 2012; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020; Sykes, 1958).

Implications

Perhaps the most important findings that emerged from this research were the strategies that officers described using to maintain their safety. Officers in our research emphasized a strong preference for using communication to keep safe because it reduced their risk of physical injury (because they were not physically engaging with prisoners) and created a longer-lasting calming effect in the unit (compared to using physical force against prisoners). However, officers also described attributes of other officers that barred them from effectively using communication to maintain their safety, such as officers’ skill level. These findings suggest that a stronger focus on developing the communication skills of officers during initial training with Ara Poutama

Aotearoa and ongoing refresher training for soft skills may increase an officer's capability of delivering these tactics and their confidence to do so, creating a safer environment for everyone. Further, if officers in middle management identify officers who have lesser developed communication skills (as many did in this current study), they may 'buddy' them up for mentoring or shadowing with an officer who has better developed skills, similar to the 'shadowing' process during initial training.

Theoretically, our findings establish that some organizational factors may be detrimental to the wellbeing of both officers and prisoners. Organizational factors that increase prisoner-to-officer ratios (i.e., understaffing and prisoner crowding) create chaotic environments, which—from a deprivation perspective—prisoners may respond to with violence against officers. Although certainly not novel, these findings suggest that increasing corrections officer safety is not as simple as increasing officers' capabilities; there are significant systemic factors that have far-reaching implications for the safety of everyone in prison.

Limitations

Although we achieved theoretical saturation during the iterative interview and analysis process, we acknowledge that our theoretical model may not capture the experiences of all corrections officers in New Zealand (e.g., people that work in prisons with specific focuses such as remand prisons). Because we used snowball sampling, our participants may have referred colleagues that shared similar values or opinions as them, therefore our theoretical model may only cover the opinions and experiences of a relatively homogenous group of officers. Our findings also may not be generalizable to the experiences of officers in environments where relatively few staff work; for instance, only two participants had worked in women's prisons (who make up 7.5% of the prisoner population; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025c) and only one

participant had worked with maximum security prisoners (who make up 1.9% of the prisoner population; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2025c). As such, our findings may not reflect how officers interact with women compared to men (i.e., do officers make decisions differently when interacting with women compared to men?) or how officers maintain their safety around maximum security prisoners (i.e., do officers still strongly prefer using communication over and above physical measures while interacting with maximum security prisoners?). Although we developed our theoretical model using the rich, first-person experiences of New Zealand corrections officers, we suggest a degree of caution when applying it outside of our sampled population.

Future Directions

We developed a theoretical model of how corrections officers use different strategies to maintain their safety throughout interactions with prisoners that varied based on the intensity of the situations, and from that model emerged relationships between categories and subcategories that future research may empirically test. First, we identified one primary strategy that officers used for each of the three distinct types of interactions they had with prisoners; however, in practice, it is unlikely that these distinctions are as clear-cut as we have illustrated in our model. Rather, it is more likely that interactions between prisoners and officers fluctuate in intensity, and officers may use multiple different strategies during one interaction with prisoners. Although our research captured how officers used strategies to maintain their safety, we did not ask participants to describe their decision-making processes as their interactions with prisoners escalated. Future research may examine how corrections officers make decisions based on a variety of factors. For example, are there specific behaviors that prisoners exhibit that may trigger an officer to escalate their response? To what extent do officers purposefully consider risk

as they interact with prisoners, or is it an instinctual process that is developed with experience?

Officers also described two types of barriers that made it difficult for them to effectively use strategies to maintain their safety: officer attributes (e.g., skills, attitudes) and prisoner-to-officer ratios. In our study, officers described how these barriers hindered their ability to keep themselves safe, but they described “just getting on with it” despite their safety being at risk.

Future research may examine whether there are concrete measures officers use to manage their safety to minimize the effect of barriers. How do officers manage understaffing without risking their safety and wellbeing, and how do the actions of officers in these situations align with custodial policy? Finally, when discussing possible motivations or causes for assault, officers thought they did not contribute to their assault occurring. Future research may examine the precursors to physical assault incidents, and ask: did officers inadvertently contribute to assaults occurring but were unaware of those behaviours, or were they truly just in the “wrong place at the wrong time”?

Conclusion

Working in prisons can be dangerous and corrections officers develop strategies to manage their safety while interacting with prisoners and completing the daily regime. By developing a theoretical model of how officers use different strategies to maintain their safety during different interactions with prisoners, this research examined how officers keep themselves safe while working in prison.

Chapter Six: How prison work affects the emotional wellbeing of corrections officers

Working in a prison is not a simple task: it is well established that corrections officers experience high levels of negative psychological and emotional consequences attributed to their work in prison. However, less is known about how corrections officers construct their emotional wellbeing in relation to their work in prison. Therefore, in this chapter we discuss the extended findings of a previous qualitative study where we interviewed 21 corrections officers to construct a theoretical model of how officers perceive their safety at work. In the previous qualitative study, in the interest of conciseness, we elected not to include findings regarding corrections officers' emotional wellbeing. However, the emotional wellbeing of corrections officers contributes to—and is a cornerstone of—their overarching health and wellbeing. This thesis sought to understand all facets of corrections officer safety, therefore in this chapter, we will discuss what contributed to the emotional wellbeing of corrections officers, strategies officers used to manage their wellbeing, and officers' suggestions to improve their wellbeing.

It is well established that corrections officers experience a myriad of negative consequences from working in prison. In addition to reporting high rates of physical injury (largely caused by being assaulted by prisoners), corrections officers also report high rates of psychological disorders (e.g., high rates of symptoms of depression and anxiety, high rates of symptoms of PTSD and diagnosed PTSD) compared to people in other occupations (e.g., nurses, in-patient security officers; Boudoukha et al., 2013; Fusco et al., 2021; Jaegers, 2020; Kinman et al., 2016; Schwartz & Allen, 2024; Spinaris et al., 2012).

In addition to diagnoses and symptoms of psychological disorders, officers also experience high rates of emotional consequences (e.g., emotional exhaustion, stress), which are contributed to by the high occupational stressors of their role (e.g., high workloads, exposure to

violence). Consistently interacting with prisoners and being exposed to violence and aggression may contribute to high levels of stress and prolonged feelings of stress, leading to emotional exhaustion (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Coulling et al., 2024; Crewe et al., 2011; Kinman et al., 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2018; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). Negative perceptions of occupational involvement (e.g., feeling undervalued by supervisors, an imbalance between effort and rewards, lack of involvement in decision-making) also contribute to officers experiencing emotional consequences (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Slate & Vogel, 1997).

Emotional consequences caused by work may impact officers in their personal lives. Previous research identifies three primary sources of work-family-conflict (i.e., time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based), where the strain from one role (i.e., work) makes it difficult to participate or fulfil the requirements of another role (i.e., family; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins et al., 2022b). Time-based conflict refers to when the time requirements from work detract from a person's home life (e.g., doing overtime, long shifts); strain-based conflict captures how the demands of their job can affect their personal life (e.g., exposure to violence at work); behavior-based conflict refers to when the behaviors used to be successful at work have the opposite effect at home (e.g., being hyper alert, being tough). These three types of work-family-conflict are relevant to corrections officers and their personal lives; the emotional consequences officers experience from their work may also "spill over" (Crawley & Crawley, 2008, p. 149) into their lives at home (Higgins et al., 2022b). The emotional exhaustion officers develop from working in prison may contribute to feelings of exhaustion at home, which can limit their ability to participate in familial roles and engage with their family (i.e., time-based conflict; Higgins et al., 2022b; Nylander et al., 2011). Officers may become quick to anger, be prone to irritability or implement prison-based punishments at home (e.g., doing 'cell searches'

of their children's bedrooms), which may be attributed to consistent interactions with prisoners or being frustrated that their children do not comply with them after a long day of prisoners being noncompliant (i.e., strain- and behavior-based conflict; Higgins et al., 2022b; Johnston et al., 2024).

The role of corrections officers requires a certain level of physical wellbeing to maintain their safety. Officers must endure long periods of high alertness to ensure the safety and security of the prison and the people within it—both those housed there and those who work there—which may be especially challenging if officers are emotionally unwell (e.g., stressed, emotionally exhausted). As such, the poor emotional wellbeing of officers may decrease their physical safety and the physical safety of those around them. Holistic models of wellbeing (e.g., Te Whare Tapa Whā; Durie, 1985) highlight the importance of all aspects of a person's wellbeing (i.e., physical, mental, spiritual, social) being in balance to allow a person to thrive; if there is a deficit (or 'unbalance') in one aspect of wellbeing, a person may become unwell. In this thesis we have focused on the physical and social safety of corrections officers; however, we have not yet discussed the emotional, social or spiritual wellbeing of officers. Guided by Te Whare Tapa Whā holistic model of wellbeing (Durie, 1985), we think that to understand the overall wellbeing of corrections officers, we must also understand their emotional and social (and where possible, their spiritual) wellbeing.

This Study

Recently, researchers have identified a need for establishing a cohesive definition for emotional wellbeing to understand whether psychological factors (e.g., psychological disorders) should be encompassed within the definition of emotional wellbeing or whether these are two distinct phenomena (Feller et al., 2018; Park et al., 2023). Some researchers suggest that to be

emotionally well, people must experience more pleasant emotions than unpleasant emotions (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Reh et al., 2021), while others consider a person's life satisfaction, sense of purpose or meaning, and social relationships as integral facets of emotional wellbeing (Feller et al., 2018). Although research regarding emotional wellbeing is developing, there is still no consensus about how best to define it (Park et al., 2023). In this research, we adopted a simplified version of the definition of emotional wellbeing developed by Parks and colleagues (2023) derived by work from Feller and colleagues (2018). Therefore, in this research we defined emotional wellbeing as: how positive an individual feels generally and about life overall, which includes short-term feelings (i.e., every day and momentary experiences) and long-term feelings (i.e., life satisfaction), and which occurs across different contexts in an individual's life (i.e., at home and at work). In this research, we aimed to understand how corrections officers perceived their emotional wellbeing in relation to their experience of working in prisons and to understand the strategies corrections officers used protect their emotional wellbeing.

Method

In a previous study we interviewed 21 corrections officers who worked in New Zealand prisons. We followed a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to develop a theoretical model of how corrections officers constructed their personal safety at work. Our first round of participants were recruited from a larger project; we approached corrections officers who indicated that they were open to being contacted for a future research study. Once we began interviewing participants, we used snowball sampling to recruit further participants by asking at the end of each interview for participants to recommend any colleagues they believed would be open to being contacted for an interview. We included current corrections officers and people who had been employed by Ara Poutama Aotearoa (New Zealand Department of

Corrections) within one year of being interviewed. On average interviews lasted around one hour and 15 minutes; interviews were conducted by phone call, video conference (i.e., Zoom or Microsoft Teams) or onsite at the University of Waikato or a location of the participant's choosing (e.g., their prison site, a local café). We conducted semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule that contained key topics and ideas; however, by adopting a grounded theory methodology we did not need to cover all written topics and discussion was guided by the conversation and topics that the participant was interested in discussing.

With the consent of our participants, we audio-recorded most interviews¹⁷ and then used an automated transcription service to transcribe each interview. Once we had manually checked each transcript for accuracy, we sent it back to the interview participant to allow participants to redact any information or to clarify ideas that were not presented correctly in text. Once participants verified that their transcript was acceptable for use, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading the transcript multiple times.

Following constructivist grounded theory, we concurrently collected data (i.e., interviewed participants) and analyzed data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We began by open coding transcripts (i.e., line-by-line) by assigning meaning to small sections of text to produce codes. Next, we completed axial coding by establishing connections between codes, to produce categories. As categories emerged from the data, we updated our interview schedule to further explore categories with future participants and conducted another round of interviews. We repeated this process until no new categories emerged from the data that would extend the existing categories, which indicated that we had reach theoretical saturation (Favourate, 2020). In the previous research, we then completed selective coding to integrate all the categories into a

¹⁷One participant who did not want to be interviewed, so we instead took handwritten notes of the conversation.

model that visualized the connections between categories and subcategories. However, for the data presented in this chapter, we did not complete selective coding; instead, we will descriptively report key findings that emerged from the axial coding stage of the previous research. Although we excluded these findings from the overarching model, when taken with our other data throughout this thesis, they significantly contribute to this thesis because they provide valuable insight into corrections officer safety from a holistic perspective.

Results

Taylor: Emotional and psychological safety is probably, for me, the biggest safety issue as an officer. Because some of the shit you see, some of the shit you hear, some of the stuff you have to go through... You know, it's bit like bullying, I guess. When it's a one-off and it's out of your normal you're like, "whoa", but you deal with it. But when it actually becomes normal and it's toxic, and it just slowly, slowly... It's like the big boulders and the waves keep hitting them, and they get smaller and smaller and smaller. I feel like that's like your mental health and your psychological safety. When the waves keep hitting, someone needs to section off that waterway.

Four main categories emerged from the data that were relevant to how officers perceived their role and how they constructed their emotional wellbeing. The first category, 'Feeling undervalued' included feeling undervalued *internally* by supervisors or prison management and feeling undervalued *externally* by the public. Second, 'Negative consequences' captured officers' experiences of role dissatisfaction, stress and exhaustion, and how these consequences affected their quality of life at home. 'Negative consequences' also included how some officers thought that they had fundamentally changed as a person because of their work in prison. Third, 'Coping strategies' captured both positive (i.e., healthy) and negative (i.e., harmful) strategies that officers

used to manage the consequences they experienced from their role. ‘Coping strategies’ also included how officers transitioned between ‘work mode’ (i.e., being alert and aware) and ‘home mode’ (i.e., being relaxed and less alert). The final category that emerged was ‘Recommendations’ which included officers’ suggestions for improving their emotional wellbeing; this category included both *individual* level recommendations that each officer may adopt, and *occupational* recommendations directed to Ara Poutama Aotearoa.

Feeling Undervalued

Internally. Participants described feeling undervalued in both a professional sense (i.e., being under appreciated by people *internal* to their work, such as their supervisors and managers) and also by society (i.e., people *external* to their work, such as the general public, viewed corrections officers poorly or forgot about them completely). Some corrections officers described feeling unappreciated by managers and expressed disappointment in the lack of recognition they received for succeeding in their role. Participants who had previously been corrections officers but who had progressed into middle management roles (i.e., senior or principal corrections officers) expressed similar sentiments: that the corrections officers they managed were excellent at their job but seldom received recognition or praise by staff higher up in Ara Poutama Aotearoa. It is important to note, however, that officers strongly emphasized that feelings of being undervalued (or not) were highly dependent on their supervisors. Most officers described having supportive supervisors (either currently or previously) who acknowledged their achievements, but this was dependent on their current unit or prison. Both corrections officers and officers in middle management positions thought that when officers were not valued by their supervisors, they did “the bare minimum” at work and did not expend any effort above what was required for their role. Some officers thought that increasing officers’ input into unit-level

decision-making may increase their perceptions of feeling valued by management and therefore increase the effort they would be willing to expend. One officer specified that having an input into decision-making was not about power, it was about “being heard” and having supervisors listen to their ideas, even if they don’t necessarily implement them.

Externally. Participants felt underappreciated by people *external* to their work in prisons; there was a consensus among participants that corrections officers had a negative public image. Most officers were nonchalant or not concerned about how society viewed them; a few officers even considered the public perspective of them amusing. However, others expressed a resentful perspective and thought that their negative public image was unfairly earned. There were three main ways officers thought they were perceived by society: one, that they were ‘power trippers’ and ‘bullies’; two, that they were completely ignored and forgotten about by society; and three, that they were ‘dropouts’ who were not accepted into the Police. Some officers blamed their negative public image on portrayals in the media (e.g., television and movies). Others speculated that society viewed them poorly because corrections officers were “out of sight, out of mind” and people were only reminded of them when negative incidents happened in prison. Officers expressed dismay at the media attention garnered by incidents that rarely occurred (e.g., escapes, riots) and disappointment in the lack of media attention for the hundreds of positive interactions that occurred between officers and prisoners daily.

Zeus: The public as a whole, has no idea what goes on in prisons. None at all. And our media people do an exceptional job of trying to get stories out there, but the media is not interested in good stories from prisons. They want something that blows the flashing lights, you know? Stuff like that.

Officers expressed considerably stronger displeasure at the idea that society considered them lesser employees than Police because of the stereotype that “corrections officers are just people who couldn’t get into the Police” [*Xena*] and “no one aspires to be a corrections officer, they just end up here” [*Elsie*]. Some officers considered it unfair that they were generally held in lower esteem than the Police, even citing their treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic when police officers were considered ‘first responders’ but corrections officers weren’t.

Negative Consequences

The negative consequences participants experienced from their work in prison included consequences directly related to their role and their daily responsibilities (e.g., low job satisfaction, high stress) and also included persistent, longer lasting consequences that impact their personal lives outside of work (e.g., exhaustion, personality changes over time).

Job dissatisfaction. We asked officers what initially prompted them to join Ara Poutama Aotearoa and what may prompt them to leave (or, in the case of ex-corrections officers, what did prompt them to leave). Some people who were no longer corrections officers described leaving after feeling deeply dissatisfied when their day-to-day duties stopped aligning with their purpose for joining Ara Poutama Aotearoa. These officers typically joined to help prisoners with rehabilitation, which became near impossible as the proportion of remand prisoners (i.e., prisoners that were not yet sentenced, but were held in custody as they awaited their trial) increased. People who were still corrections officers thought they might leave if they found a better opportunity; however, officers generally thought they got paid well for a job that required no qualifications, no experience and work that was generally safe. As such, a few people described being a corrections officer as a “trap” because even if they wanted to leave, they were unlikely to find work as well paid.

Elsie: They have no marketable tools outside being a corrections officer, so they've really got nowhere else to go. They're kind of trapped by the job, you know? A prison officer with not that much overtime can be making \$100,000 a year, and they don't have the opportunity to gain that kind of remuneration anywhere else. So they're sort of trapped by the job, they can't go anywhere else. But they really don't want to be there. And that affects the way they deal with everything.

However, one officer who was considering leaving his job thought that—based on previous colleagues' experiences—leaving Ara Poutama Aotearoa and taking a pay cut would be worth it to improve his emotional wellbeing.

Interviewer: Oh right. Do you want to look for a different job?

Samuel: I've looked but nothing pays what we get paid here. And that's the thing that sucks and kept a lot of people here. You talk to the people that's left; they've taken a pay cut but fuck they're happy <laughs>. But no, I'll still be here, yeah.

Stress. Most officers described feeling stressed to varying degrees at work and in their personal life, but their level of stress was dependent on their role, their unit, and the people they interacted with at work (e.g., colleagues, supervisors, and prisoners). Those who were in the role of corrections officers described short periods of stress at work that was generally limited to specific situations (e.g., periods of understaffing) and they thought stress had limited impact on their personal life, but the same was not true for people who held middle management positions. Senior and principal corrections officers described two facets of stress: worry for the officers they supervised (described as “their team”) and workload pressures. *All* officers in middle management positions described feeling stressed about the safety of their team, especially when they themselves were not working. Regarding workload, some officers could not complete their

administrative tasks during their shift because they were helping corrections officers complete the daily regime; therefore, they spent their time at home completing paperwork.

Eleanor: As a staff member on the floor, it was quite easy for me to switch off. As a manager, it wasn't easy <laughs>. [I was] always thinking about it. Have I done everything for the day? Is that staff member gonna be alright? What more could I have done? That type of thinking. And then just catching up with my work after work. Early hours in the morning. Just trying to catch up because I had to deal with so much stuff at work, with the staff, with the prisoners, that I haven't actually had time to do my own work.

Exhaustion. Most officers described feeling physically and mentally exhausted because of working in prison regardless of their role, which had a negative impact on their personal life. Officers thought their exhaustion was caused by long periods of heightened alertness, long shifts (officers regularly completed 12-hour shifts) and from ‘callbacks’ (i.e., optional overtime). This level of exhaustion had a negative impact on officers’ personal lives; some officers described having no energy to engage with their family after work.

Rupert: Like when I get home, my kids will be like, "Should we go fishing Dad? Or should we do this?" And all I want to do is go to sleep.

Some officers described accidentally slipping into ‘officer habits’ at home by talking to their family as if they were prisoners (e.g., giving them orders, speaking to their children bluntly). One participant described feeling so exhausted and irritable after being in the noisy prison environment all day that when he returned home he yelled at his children for watching the television too loudly, even though he had never raised his voice at his children previously.

Personality changes. Many officers thought that working in prison had fundamentally changed them as a person and described becoming ‘harder’, ‘tougher’, and ‘meaner’ because of their work as a corrections officer. Officers described changes in their personality that developed because of their interactions with prisoners; these changes did not always have negative impacts on their lives, but they were obvious changes that officers and their families noticed. For example, officers described being constantly alert while in public with their families, which included noting where their nearest exit was at all times and never sitting with their back to the door at restaurants. Generally, officers had developed a strong sense of suspicion because of their interactions with prisoners who were consistently trying to manipulate them. Officers described questioning whether family members had ulterior motives, or being suspicious of interactions they witnessed.

Elsie: I mean, it sounds a little bit sinister, but I'm actually at the point now that if somebody does something nice for me, my first thought is, "What is their ulterior motive?" And I wasn't like that before I started with Corrections. And then I catch myself and say, "This is my brother or my mother, you know, they're not out for something." ... There was a time I'd walk down the street and see granddad playing with his kids at the park and go, "Oh isn't that sweet?" Now I tend to look at it and go, "What's that old guy doing with that kid?" ... I have these thoughts that I didn't used to have.

We asked participants whether they would recommend working in prison to family members or friends. One officer cited ‘changing as a person’ as a reason that he could not recommend working in prison to a family member; he had become tougher from working in prison and he did not want to see someone he loved change in the same way.

Zeus: Somebody once asked me, would I like my son to start in the service? And I said, "No." And they said, "Why?" And I said, "Because it will change him." He's a very gentle person. If it was somebody else, I'd say yes! But I would hate to see... because it changed me, you know? That's the reality. I don't want to see any member of my family change, because sometimes... the mongrel has to come out in you, you know?

Coping Strategies

Negative coping strategies. Officers described a range of coping strategies that they thought helped them “get through the day”. These coping strategies were used by officers to provide short-term relief from negative feelings attributed to their work in prison. However, some coping strategies officers used (i.e., negative coping strategies) may ultimately harm officers in the long-term (i.e., by using these coping strategies, officers’ wellbeing may worsen over time). First, many officers cited dark humor (i.e., comedy that makes light of subject matter that is considered in bad taste or taboo) as a common coping strategy. Officers had witnessed a range of traumatic incidents in prison throughout their careers (e.g., violence, self-harm, suicide) and described being de-sensitized to the point that they could joke with colleagues about what they had experienced or witnessed. Officers thought that sharing a similar sense of dark humor with colleagues helped them bond (i.e., strengthen their working relationships) and lessened the impact of what they had experienced. However, not all officers agreed that dark humor was work-appropriate; a few officers described not engaging with their colleagues’ dark humor because it minimized the severity of the situation and invalidated the trauma of people involved (e.g., prisoners who had self-harmed, prisoners involved in a fight).

A few officers described isolating themselves from other people and ‘bottling up’ their emotions (i.e., not sharing) as a way of not processing trauma they experienced at work. These

officers sometimes described abusing alcohol to manage their experiences of working in prison. Officers who employed these coping strategies preferred to ‘deal with’ their emotions themselves and described not wanting to confide in people outside of prison either (e.g., family, friends) because they did not want to worry them or expose them to the reality of prison work. As such, these officers used isolation and alcohol as coping techniques to protect those around them.

Xena: There are some things that I need to offload. And I definitely never will do it with my family. My family never know the horrific things. They're concerned about my [physical] safety, but they don't know the mental wellbeing and the things that... that I deal with. So, it's hard.

Positive coping strategies. On the other hand, officers also described using positive coping strategies to handle their experiences in prison and to protect their emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Distinct from negative coping strategies, *positive* coping strategies can provide long-term benefits for officers in addition to providing short-term relief. These techniques included regularly exercising, following a healthy diet, getting regular massages, hiking and being out in nature, gaming, and engaging in religious or spiritual practices (e.g., praying, cleansing rituals). Some officers also emphasized the importance of having a strong support system that they could privately vent to; these support systems were made up of selected trusted colleagues and people not involved in corrections who could offer an ‘outsider’s point of view (e.g., spouses, friends).

It is important to acknowledge that participants also shared positive aspects of their role which helped lessen the negative consequences of their work. Some participants described ‘drawing on’ their reasons for working at Ara Poutama Aotearoa when they were feeling particularly challenged at work, such as their ability to make a difference in people’s lives (i.e.,

contributing to the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners into society). Many officers described having job security and being adequately compensated for their work (with the opportunity to increase their income by working additional shifts), which were positive aspects of the job that they considered during difficult days at work.

‘Work mode’ versus ‘home mode’. We were interested in whether officers had any processes that they routinely followed that helped them transition between being alert at work (i.e., ‘work mode’) and being able to relax in their personal life (i.e., ‘home mode’). Most officers described a distinction between ‘work mode’ and ‘home mode’ where they were tougher at work and more relaxed at home; however, some participants did not experience this distinction. The officers who did not agree with the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘home’ thought it was unnecessary to act differently to be safe at work.

Michelle: I just come to work the same way thinking, "I don't have to put on a different hat when I come to work, I'm still me. I'll go home, I'm still me. I don't have to change." I know I'm respectful. I know I'm caring. And I know, when I have to, I can be very direct. So I'm happy with that, because I don't have to change.

Of the officers who expressed a distinction between ‘work mode’ and ‘home mode’, some officers described physical cues that signified the end of their workday, such as taking off their vest or returning their keys to the gatehouse. Many officers got changed into civilian clothes at the end of their shift and left their uniform at work for both safety reasons (i.e., they did not want members of the public seeing them in their uniform) and to signal that their work was done for the day. Other officers described purposefully showering immediately after work to ‘wash off the day’, particularly if they had been working in especially difficult environments (e.g., intervention and support units where prisoners had serious mental health problems). Most

officers described a process where they slowly transitioned from ‘work mode’ to ‘home mode’ using environmental cues; officers described post-shift routines where they reflected on the day as they progressed through the prison (e.g., from their unit to the gatehouse, from the gatehouse to their car) and on their commute home.

Joseph: I usually leave it all at work. I never take stuff home. You kind of have to leave it at the door.

Interviewer: Is that easy for you to do?

Joseph: I think so. I think walking out the door to your car, to the car park, it's a good way to reset. Like, "Okay, we're done for the day." Like, we don't need to worry about it anymore. Tomorrow is a new day. If we haven't done everything today, we can always do it tomorrow.

Some officers had specific landmarks during their commute (e.g., a bridge they crossed) that signified the end of their workday and once they reached that landmark, they stopped thinking about work. This process allowed officers time to reflect on their decisions at work that day but also provided a hard boundary between work and home. Officers also used these landmarks on their commute *to* work to signal that they needed to ‘switch on’ and begin the process of preparing for the day ahead (e.g., thinking about what they needed to do that day, starting to become more alert).

Recommendations

Officers recognized that Ara Poutama Aotearoa provided resources for supporting them and their emotional wellbeing (e.g., Employee Assistance Programmes, counselling services), but officers in this study had not accessed those resources because of skepticism or privacy concerns. First, perhaps because of the well-established ‘macho’ culture of prisons, some officers

did not think these resources could be helpful and considered them a waste of time. On the other hand, because these resources were offered by Ara Poutama Aotearoa, officers were concerned that they would not protect their privacy and that their colleagues or supervisors would know that they had sought help. Confidentiality was a concern for officers because they did not want to be perceived as ‘weak’ by their colleagues for seeking help or they were worried their supervisors would inadvertently ‘punish’ them by supporting them (e.g., supervisors would move them to a different unit or reduce the amount of overtime officers could do).

To combat officers’ refusal or hesitancy to use the services that Ara Poutama Aotearoa provided, some officers suggested enforcing mandatory counselling for *all* officers regardless of their personal opinions of counselling. Making counselling mandatory would reduce the stigma around officers seeking help because they could scoff at counselling among their colleagues but privately appreciate having someone to talk to. Having mandatory counselling for corrections officers may follow a similar approach to the professional supervision psychologists receive; it may be a required facet of the role to offer support to officers and provide an avenue for communication and advice. However, it is important to note that officers recognized the intense resourcing constraints typical of prisons and acknowledged that mandatory counselling for all officers may not be realistic. As such, some officers thought that while Ara Poutama Aotearoa could implement strategies to improve corrections officers’ emotional wellbeing, it was really each individual’s responsibility to be aware of, and manage, their own emotional safety.

Taylor: It's the self-awareness. It's the being able to understand that they all work together, like psychological and emotional and physical... everything works together, right? Everything. It's being aware of your signs that [you] might be getting affected. Am

I being snappy at people? Am I feeling sad? I don't know how to explain it... like, I've just always done it because no one else is going to do it for you.

Discussion

In this research, we aimed to understand whether corrections officers thought that working in prison affected their emotional safety. We found that officers experienced stress and emotional exhaustion at varying degrees depending on characteristics of their role and some officers experienced conflict between their work and family life, where aspects of their role ‘spilled over’ into their personal lives. Officers described both negative (e.g., dark humor, alcohol) and positive (e.g., exercise, spiritual practices) coping strategies that they used to manage the occupational stressors of their job and offered suggestions for how they—or Ara Poutama Aotearoa—may better support corrections officers’ emotional health. Officers recognized that their emotional wellbeing affected their social wellbeing (e.g., their ties with family and friends outside of work) and their physical wellbeing (e.g., exhaustion from their work). This finding was important because officers recognized that their wellbeing was *holistic* and each facet of their health did not exist individually, but all affected each other.

We found that senior or principal corrections officers who managed administrative and leadership tasks (e.g., managing and supervising a team of corrections officers) in addition to their security-focused duties (e.g., completing the daily regime) were more stressed than corrections officers who primarily completed security-focused duties. This finding aligns with previous research that found that officers who reported greater work demands (i.e., high workloads) also reported more stress than officers who considered their work demands reasonable (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). This finding may be attributed to understaffing (i.e., when the number of officers is fewer than the minimum number to

comfortably complete the daily regime); when units are understaffed senior and principal corrections officers may spend more time completing security-focused tasks to help their team and therefore have less time left to complete their administrative tasks during their shift. Experiencing role conflict (also termed ‘job frustration’ or ‘job strain’) may also contribute to officers’ levels of stress: when officers are unclear about how to complete their tasks—or which tasks they should be prioritizing—they may become confused or frustrated about the demands of their role (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Stichman & Gordan, 2015; Triplett et al., 1996). Because officers (particularly officers in management positions) balance different tasks (e.g., administrative tasks and security-focused tasks), it may be challenging to know which tasks to prioritize and may contribute to officers’ stress levels (Bourbonnais et al., 2007; Lambert et al., 2018a; Triplett et al., 1996).

Of the consequences of working in prison, officers thought that exhaustion had a greater negative impact on their personal lives compared to stress. Some officers were so emotionally exhausted after work that it was challenging for them to engage with their family; this emotional exhaustion is an example of time-based conflict, where officers’ duties at work detracts from their ability to fulfil their familial role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins et al., 2022b; Nylander et al., 2011). One officer described having no energy to spend time with his children and only wanting to sleep, which reflected the experience of an officer in a study by Higgins and colleagues (2022b), who described not wanting to “be touched or needed or bothered” or talked to by her family after work because she was so emotionally exhausted (Higgins et al., 2022b, p. 21). We found that strain-based conflict also contributed to officers being emotionally exhausted; it was difficult for officers to interact positively with their family at home after spending the day in a noisy environment managing noncompliant prisoners. This finding aligns with a U.K study

that examined officers' experiences of work-life conflict, which found that some officers developed feelings of anxiety and irritability from interacting with prisoners, which negatively impacted their home life (Kinman et al., 2017).

Some officers thought that their work in prison changed them as a person, by becoming tougher, meaner and more suspicious of the people around them. These findings align with well-established correctional research that suggests officers become harder, desensitized to the suffering of others, less compassionate toward others, and quicker to anger than they previously had been before working in prison (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Johnston et al., 2024; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). How officers change over time to adapt to their work environment may also share similarities with research that examines how corrections officers experience work-life-conflict (Higgins et al., 2022b). The above research describes a long-term process where officers' personalities change as they adapt to the prison environment over time which can impact their personal life, whereas work-life-conflict captures how specific aspects of work may impact officers' personal lives. In particular, behavior-based conflict is a type of work-life-conflict where the skills that officers used to maintain their safety at work may be inappropriate, or even harmful, at home (Einat & Suliman, 2021; Eriksson, 2023; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022b; Johnston et al., 2024). Officers may need to become tougher and more suspicious of people to protect themselves from being manipulated by prisoners; however, while beneficial for their safety in prison, these skills may negatively impact officers in their personal lives (Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022b; Higgins et al., 2023). Becoming tougher and less compassionate toward others may damage officers' personal relationships; in previous research officers described conflict with spouses when they spoke to their spouse in the same manner they spoke to prisoners (Higgins et al., 2022b). Officers who struggle to separate prison-based skills with

their personal life may increase their risk of developing poor health outcomes, including burnout and symptoms of PTSD (Higgins et al., 2023).

In-group Solidarity with Colleagues: Out-group with Family?

Some officers in our research avoided talking to their family about work because they did not want to worry their family by exposing them to the negative experiences officers had in prison. This finding demonstrates that officers may isolate themselves from their family out of concern for their wellbeing (i.e., with the aim of protecting them) or to establish boundaries between work and home. Although this finding has also emerged from one study that examined the work-life conflict of corrections officers (Higgins et al., 2022b), in most in previous research, officers tended to isolate themselves from their families because they felt misunderstood by ‘outsiders’ (i.e., anyone who does not work in a prison; Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Johnston et al., 2024; Higgins et al., 2022b; Higgins et al., 2021). Officers were unwilling to share information with their friends or family and opted to confide in colleagues that shared “common ground” (Higgins et al., 2022b, p. 93). As such, over-time these officers adopted the common correctional practice of “in-ward secrecy” (Johnston et al., 2024, p. 3) or “in-group solidarity” (Higgins et al., 2022b, p. 91) where they only confided in other officers. Although officers in our research described isolating themselves to protect—and therefore benefit—their family, they may still negatively affect their family by weakening their shared social bonds. Officers isolating themselves from their family may have both positive and negative impacts; positive, because officers may strengthen social bonds with their colleagues out of necessity (i.e., become more ingrained in the ‘in-group’ solidary culture), and negative, (aside from the obvious of reducing their social bonds with family) if officers are not in the ‘in-group’ among colleagues, they may be completely isolated and resort to using other coping mechanisms.

The coping mechanisms officers use to manage their emotional wellbeing may be harmful (e.g., problematic alcohol use) or may only be appropriate in specific contexts (e.g., using dark humor among colleagues). Previous research highlights that problematic alcohol use is prevalent among corrections officers, particularly as officers report high emotional demands from their job (Higgins et al., 2022a; Shepherd et al., 2019; Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017). More extensive research focuses on the use of humor as a coping strategy that officers use as a ‘defense mechanism’ (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a). Officers may use humor in multiple ways: as comic relief to process traumatic incidents (e.g., violence, self-harm, suicide), to prevent them from looking ‘soft’ (i.e., by joking about traumatic events officers may give the impression that they were not affected), or to bond with colleagues and establish their place in the social hierarchy (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a). Officers in our study and in previous research used harmful coping strategies such as dark humor and problematic alcohol use to help them manage their emotional safety; however, these dysfunctional coping mechanisms may cause them long-term harm such as increased stress levels, increased likelihood of becoming burnt out and increased emotional exhaustion (Johnston et al., 2024).

Officers also used positive coping mechanisms to manage their emotional wellbeing, including regular exercise, self-care, and religious or spiritual practices. Most officers also described establishing boundaries between their work life and home life and had developed routines to manage the transition between the two. These findings also align with previous research, where officers described using physical cues to transition between their work life and home life during their commute to work (Garrihy, 2022; Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). These coping mechanisms have positive outcomes for officers’ emotional wellbeing: officers who can

detach themselves from work reported less work-life conflict and were less likely to be emotionally exhausted (Kinman et al., 2017).

Officers Felt Unappreciated, Invisible and Unfairly Treated by Society

Officers felt undervalued by society in different ways: one, being negatively stereotyped, two, being forgotten by society, and three, being unfairly compared to other public service workers (e.g., police, fire fighters). Officers in our research thought society viewed them as “bullies” or “power trippers”; these findings may be considered favorable compared to some previous research. A study that examined officers’ perspectives of being ‘tainted’ by working in prison found that officers thought that society viewed corrections officers as “a necessary evil” and thought society considered officers ‘tainted’ because of their close association with prisoners (Garrihy, 2022, p. 989). Other research suggests that officers are largely stereotyped as “unintelligent, brutal and insensitive” (Crawley & Crawley, 2008, p. 136). How officers in our research managed the public’s negative opinion of them differed from how officers in previous research managed poor public opinion. Officers in our research described feeling disappointed or displeased about the negative stereotypes but generally ignored it or even laughed about it. Officers in previous research were more defensive about their position and they considered themselves ‘protectors’ (i.e., they had to work at prison to protect civilians from being raped or murdered by prisoners; Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2022a; Liebling et al., 2011). These officers also engaged in ‘othering’ where they established strong boundaries between themselves and prisoners, and thought prisoners were distinctly different from other people (e.g., prisoners were ‘nightmares’; Garrihy, 2022).

On the other hand, in our research, some officers thought that society did not think about them at all and considered themselves ‘forgotten’ and ‘out of sight, out of mind’. This finding

aligns with previous research which found that officers expressed a shared belief that nobody cared about them; a perspective that contributed to the social isolation of officers because officers treated ‘outsiders’ with mistrust and caution (Crawley & Crawley, 2008). Our findings also corroborated the belief that corrections officers are largely forgotten about until they ‘fail’ (e.g., until escapes or disturbances occur, until a prisoner commits suicide; Liebling et al., 2011).

Perhaps the most interesting way officers felt undervalued in our research was their comparisons to other public service workers. In our research, officers generally expressed mild or moderate opinions about society’s negative perceptions of them or their perceived invisibility to the public; some even expressed humor at the situation. However, they did express considerable displeasure toward being considered the “poor cousin of the Police”. This finding also aligns with previous research in which officers experienced “deep resentment and disappointment” at not being “on par” (i.e., equal to) with other public service workers (e.g., police, nurses, firemen; Crawley & Crawley, 2008, p. 147).

Feeling Undervalued by Supervisors: Opportunities for Improvement

There were two ways that officers’ perspectives of their supervisors and managers affected their emotional safety: one, officers thought that they rarely received recognition for their work and that managers did not appreciate them (which contributed to officers doing the ‘bare minimum’), and two, the supportive resources offered by Ara Poutama Aotearoa were flawed. Officers thought that increasing the opportunity for corrections officers to contribute to decision-making could help make officers feel valued and appreciated by management, which would increase officers’ efforts at work. By engaging officers in unit-level decisions, officers may ‘buy in’ (i.e., accept or be willing to engage in) to their work and therefore expend more effort into their duties and increase their safety. These recommendations align with previous

research; consistent with general organizational literature, when corrections officers experience lower input into decision-making in their role, they are more likely to also report higher levels of psychological distress (Bourbonnais et al., 2007). Moreover, increasing officers' input into decision making may also increase how safe they feel at work and reduce their turnover intent (Lambert et al., 2018a; Lambert et al., 2018b; Slate & Vogel, 1997).

Officers thought that mandatory counselling for all corrections officers could be an improvement over and above the currently offered services (e.g., the Employee Assistance Programme, counselling that officers must proactively seek). By making counselling mandatory, it would reduce the stigma around seeking help because all officers must engage with it and officers could attribute their engagement to the mandatory nature of the resource, even if they willingly engage in the service. By reducing the stigma associated with seeking help and offering positive coping strategies to officers, officers may be less inclined to use harmful coping mechanisms (e.g., problematic alcohol use, isolating themselves), which would increase their emotional, social, and physical safety. However, it is important to note that officers in our research acknowledged the financial burden associated with this recommendation and therefore recognized the low likelihood of Ara Poutama Aotearoa establishing mandatory counselling for all corrections officers. With this limitation in mind, realistically this recommendation by officers in our study may be answered by examining how New Zealand Police mandate psychological assessments to officers involved in critical incidents (e.g., a shooting where an officer's actions contributes to a person sustaining life-threatening injuries or dying; New Zealand Police, 2022). Officers in our study described being offered psychological support following incidents of violence in prison that they declined because they thought they didn't need it, but only realized later that they may have benefitted from the support. Taken together, our findings and New

Zealand Police policy for managing officers' wellbeing following critical incidents suggest that corrections officers may benefit from Ara Poutama Aotearoa mandating psychological support after critical incidents (e.g., violence) in prison.

Conclusion

Officers recognized that aspects of their role reduced their health in many ways: socially (e.g., officers isolating themselves, work-life-conflict), physically (e.g., exhaustion), and emotionally (e.g., stress, feeling undervalued). Officers had their own processes and strategies for managing their emotional health but acknowledged that strategies could be improved by themselves and by Ara Poutama Aotearoa.

Chapter Seven: General Discussion

In this thesis, we examined factors that decreased and increased the perceived safety and overall wellbeing of corrections officers who worked in New Zealand prisons. First, we identified characteristics of prisoners, of officers, and of units that predicted serious physical harm perpetrated by prisoners towards corrections officers. Then, we developed a grounded theory of how corrections officers themselves constructed their own personal safety depending on their working relationships in prison and identified strategies that officers used to keep safe. Finally, we examined how working in prison also affected the emotional and social wellbeing of corrections officers. We used a quantitative database of prisoner-to-officer assaults and qualitative interviews with corrections officers to address two overarching research questions:

1. What are the predictors of harm against corrections officers?
2. How do corrections officers perceive and construct their personal safety at work?

It is important to note that we have examined corrections officer safety in two ways. First, relevant to our first research question, we examined rates of prisoner-to-officer assault at different levels of severity, and identified predictors of harm towards officers. Second, pertinent to research question two, we have also examined how officers themselves perceive their safety at work. To do so, we interviewed corrections officers and developed a grounded theory to understand how corrections officers construct their own personal safety in the workplace. Corrections officers' perspectives of their safety oftentimes contextualised and extended our quantitative findings of what reduces officer safety, which we will further discuss throughout this chapter.

As previously established, we have addressed our research questions through an ecological lens. That is, we have examined how individual- (e.g., officer and prisoner

characteristics), relationship- (e.g., working relationships between colleagues and with prisoners) and prison-level characteristics (e.g., the physical and situational environment) may predict harm towards corrections officers or impact how officers perceive their safety at work. Therefore, in this chapter as we discuss the main findings from chapters two to six, we also discuss how these findings interact with other results across this program of research, from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Finally, we present the theoretical and practical implications of this research, discuss some of the strengths and limitations of this thesis, and offer suggestions for future directions of research.

Key Findings

What are the Predictors of Harm Against Corrections Officers?

Prisoner characteristics that predicted serious violence. Although most previous research examines predictors of *any* violence against corrections officers, our findings from chapter two aligned with previous research that did examine predictors of violence of different severities (Brabyn et al., 2023; Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007). Prisoners who perpetrated serious violence against officers were younger, gang affiliated, higher security, and in directed segregation (i.e., they were separated from the general population because they posed a risk to others) compared to prisoners who perpetrated minor or moderate violence towards officers (i.e., violence that did not result in severe injuries to the victim). Notably, significantly more prisoners that perpetrated No Injury and Non-serious violence against corrections officers were not in directed segregation and held lower security classifications than prisoners who perpetrated Serious violence against officers.

That higher security prisoners or prisoners in directed segregation were more likely to perpetrate serious violence against corrections officers aligns with our findings from chapter four: officers typically exercised more caution and expressed a need to be “more switched on” around prisoners with histories of aggression and violence. These findings somewhat are consistent with previous research; for instance, officers who work in higher security units may be more fearful of violence by prisoners compared to officers in lower security units (Stichman & Gordan, 2015). Further, the security classification of prisoners considers a prisoner’s propensity for violence; therefore, prisoners with higher propensities for violence are likely to hold higher security classifications (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, n.d.-b).

In our model of officer perceptions of safety, corrections officers also described feeling less safe around remand prisoners, largely due to their unpredictability (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013). However, prisoners’ remand or sentenced status did not emerge as a predictor of serious violence against corrections officers in chapter two from our quantitative analyses. Rather, remand prisoners were overrepresented as perpetrators of any physical violence against corrections officers, compared to the total population of prisoners. Taken together, these findings may suggest that how safe corrections officers feel may not depend on the severity of harm that prisoners could inflict upon them, but may be influenced by how unpredictable different prisoners can be, therefore decreasing officers’ preparedness to respond to violence. Previous research indicates that the unpredictability of certain prisoners (e.g., prisoners with mental illnesses) may be a concern for officers, because these prisoners may have “violent outbursts” (Goulette et al., 2022, p. 25) and unexpectedly assault officers (Goulette et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2011).

Officer characteristics that predict violence victimization. Regarding officer characteristics, previous research suggests that men are more likely to be a victim of *any* physical assault by a prisoner compared to women (Ferraresso & Peterson, 2025; Gordon et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Sorensen et al., 2011; Steiner & Woolredge, 2017); our findings in chapter three extend previous literature by suggesting that men were also more likely to be victims of *serious* violence compared to women who work in prison. However, as we found in our grounded theory in chapters four and five, other officer characteristics may be more pertinent for their safety, such as their skill level and how they interact with prisoners. Indeed, officers described colleagues who angered prisoners by being poor communicators (e.g., pronouncing words incorrectly, answering questions vaguely or indirectly) or by treating prisoners disrespectfully (e.g., ‘trashing’ their room during a cell search, not ‘keeping their word’ with prisoners). Regarding officer gender, in chapter four officers did not indicate a preference for working with colleagues of a particular gender; most officers described feeling safer when working with colleagues who were physically fit and strong, regardless of their gender identity. These characteristics of officers may be indicative that these officers can physically protect their colleagues and ‘have their back’ if they are in danger, which are traits that officers typically report being desirable in their colleagues (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013).

Although in this thesis officers did not overtly state whether there were certain characteristics of officers that reduced their safety, it is important to note that some characteristics may be particularly evident in certain groups of officers (e.g., newer officers may be less skilled; Bottoms, 1999; Gadon et al., 2006; Walters, 1998). Certainly, in chapter four, officers preferred to work with “old staff” because working alongside newer officers meant an exhausting and stressful shift looking after their colleague in addition to themselves.

In chapters four and five, officers suggested that these characteristics of their colleagues also reduced *their own* safety. When their colleagues aggravated prisoners, corrections officers were expected to ‘have their back’ and provide assistance during incidents of violence: potentially putting them at risk of being harmed in the process. This finding is consistent with prior research; officers who aggravate prisoners by treating them disrespectfully or antagonizing them may then also reduce the safety of their colleagues if prisoners “blow off” (Higgins et al., 2023; p. 1546) on another officer unexpectedly (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Higgins et al., 2023).

Prison characteristics that contribute to harm against officers. It is well established in previous research that some situational characteristics are predictive of violence against officers (e.g., location in prison, time of day, tasks being completed; Bottoms, 1999; McNeeley, 2021; McNeeley & Donley, 2021; Rodriguez & Waggoner, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Sorensen et al., 2011), however, there is limited research that examines whether situational factors are predictive of violence of different severities. In chapter three, we found that serious violence against corrections officers most frequently occurred near prisoners’ cells and most commonly occurred during movements, which suggests that situational characteristics may also predict *serious harm* towards officers.

In chapter three we also found that officers were more commonly assaulted by prisoners as they completed certain tasks: almost half of all assaults against corrections officers in the quantitative database immediately occurred after officers gave prisoners instructions or when officers denied prisoners something (e.g., phone calls, property requests). Although officers complete these tasks very often throughout their day—and therefore these tasks may contribute to the majority of their interactions with prisoners—these types of tasks may also elicit oppositional responses from prisoners (e.g., prisoners may become angry if an officer denies

their request or instructs them to go to their cell; Bottoms, 1999; Rodriguez et al., 2024). These findings in chapter three may suggest that how officers conduct their duties and how prisoners react to officers' role-specific actions may put officers at risk for being assaulted by prisoners; however, because this research was quantitative it offered a limited perspective of these interactions (e.g., limited information of interactions that occurred prior to the incident, how many of these interactions did not escalate to an assault). Below, as we address research question two, we discuss how corrections officers' working relationships with prisoners contributed to their safety during their interactions with prisoners.

How do Corrections Officers Perceive Their Personal Safety at Work?

In chapter three we also began to address our second overarching research question and identified ways that corrections officers kept themselves safe by examining how officers responded to incidents of physical violence. Then, in chapters four and five, in our grounded theory model, we explored how corrections officers constructed their personal safety, including examining their working relationships in prison and the strategies they used to keep themselves safe at work. Below, as we address our findings of research question two, we discuss the physical strategies and 'soft skills' (i.e., attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, such as communication or interpersonal skills) that officers used to keep safe.

Physical strategies. First, in chapter three, we found that officers responded to violent incidents using physical force, handcuffs, and—occasionally in serious incidents—pepper spray. These findings aligned with correctional policy (Corrections Act, 2004; Corrections Regulations, 2005) which stipulate that corrections officers may use physical force (including pepper spray) that is proportionate to the severity of the incident, but only once they have exhausted all other

efforts to resolve the incident without using physical measures (e.g., verbal de-escalation). A surprising finding emerged from manuscript two: officers used force more frequently during Non-serious incidents compared to Serious incidents. It is important to note, however, that officers generally responded to Serious incidents with more serious measures compared to Non-serious incidents: that is, officers used pepper spray in more than a fifth of Serious incidents compared to only 2% of Non-serious incidents. This finding suggested that, using their professional judgement, officers examined the risk of Non-serious incidents escalating to Serious incidents and therefore used physical force to prevent the incident from escalating and causing more harm to victims. Certainly, this speculation was supported during our interviews with corrections officers in chapter five: officers assessed the risk of being physically harmed by prisoners during violent incidents and occasionally used strategies proactively (i.e., before an officer was seriously injured) to keep themselves safe. These findings were consistent with previous research; in incidents of conflict with prisoners, officers may use physical force to reduce, or eliminate, the harm inflicted towards themselves or their colleagues (McNeeley, 2021).

Professional judgement. Professional judgement was a soft skill that officers consistently used to maintain or increase their safety at work. Described above, in chapter five, officers used their professional judgement when using physical measures to respond to violence, by considering the potential harm to officers during an incident and responding accordingly with appropriate physical force. A prominent finding emerged from our grounded theory model: in chapters four and five, we also found that officers used their professional judgement to decide when to use discretion while enforcing the rules (i.e., when to relax or tighten rule enforcement). For example, officers described colleagues who enforced rules inconsistently (e.g., relaxed rules

with some prisoners but not others, relaxed a rule one day but enforced it another day) or who indiscriminantly enforced rules with no flexibility (i.e., they were ‘nit-picky’), both of which officers thought contributed to tense working relationships between those colleagues and prisoners. Officers used their professional judgement by considering many factors relevant to their interaction with prisoners while completing their duties, such as the risk of compromising safety and security (e.g., being physically assaulted, creating tension in the unit), the history of the prisoner (e.g., previous behaviour, the rapport between the officer and prisoner), and the current situational environment (e.g., staffing levels, atmosphere in the unit, tasks being completed). Although some of these considerations have obvious dangers that no officer would ever risk regardless of how inexperienced they may be in prison (i.e., no officer would relax a rule that could potentially harm them, such as not locking a prisoner in their cell when they were required to), other factors are more nuanced and may require a level of experience to understand (e.g., the level of rapport between a prisoner and officer, the atmosphere in the unit). Therefore, it is not surprising that as officers gain experience in prison and interact with prisoners and colleagues, they typically become more skilled at using their professional judgement to make effective—and safer—decisions in the unit (e.g., when they can safely relax a rule, when they can joke around with prisoners).

Good working relationships. Although officers were confident to use physical strategies to maintain their safety during incidents of violence, in chapters four and five we found that during the daily routine of prison work, most officers relied on having good working relationships with prisoners to keep themselves safe. Officers considered good working relationships with prisoners as the most important, and most effective, strategy they relied on routinely to keep safe at work, which is consistent with previous correctional literature (Crawley

& Crawley, 2008; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; Liebling & Kant, 2018; Liebling et al., 2011; Schultz, 2023). As previously discussed, officers' interactions with prisoners as they complete the daily regime may impact their safety. In chapter four, officers reported that prisoners may respond to officers differently depending on their prior working relationship. Officers reported that having good working relationships with prisoners meant that prisoners were less reactive and oppositional towards them as officers conducted their duties (a facet of prison that "wears [officers] down over time" and contributes to emotional exhaustion; Ricciardelli et al., 2018, p. 467). In chapter four, officers also described prisoners as being more understanding (e.g., being more patient and less oppositional if there were unexpected changes to the regime) if they already had a good working relationship with that prisoner. Furthermore, having good working relationships with prisoners lessened the likelihood that prisoners would 'play up' around particular officers (e.g., cause disruptions in the unit that officers needed to respond to or de-escalate; Liebling et al., 2011).

In chapter four, officers suggested that having good working relationships with prisoners may keep them physically safe because prisoners viewed them as a person, rather than just another 'blue uniform' (i.e., another officer). Consistent with previous research, in chapter five, officers reported that having good working relationships with prisoners meant that prisoners may be less likely to reactively assault officers during potential conflict (e.g., officers giving prisoners instructions, discussed above; Liebling et al., 2011; Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016) and prisoners tended to be more open to officers' use of verbal de-escalation (reducing the likelihood that conflict may escalate to violence and risk officers being harmed; Dodd et al., 2024). In rare cases, officers described incidents where prisoners *protected them* from being harmed by other prisoners (these rare examples can also be found in the wider literature, see Ricciardelli &

Gazso, 2013). Taken together, the findings from chapters three, four and five suggest that although there may be riskier tasks that officers must complete during the regime (e.g., tasks that officers may be more likely to be assaulted by prisoners while completing), the tasks themselves may not be inherently risky; rather, the working relationships and interactions between officers and prisoners may be worth examining further.

Officers described positive communication (e.g., honesty, directness, firmness) as the most effective tool that helped them build good working relationships with prisoners. Indeed, in previous research some corrections officers consider communication their “optimal choice of weapon” (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013, p.110) which helps them develop a rapport with prisoners (Ricciardelli & Perry, 2016). In chapter four, officers thought that prisoners appreciated direct communication, where officers relayed relevant information (e.g., changes in the regime) and gave clear answers to prisoners’ requests (rather than giving vague responses and leaving prisoners unsure about the status of their request). This open communication with prisoners kept officers safe because prisoners were not ‘caught off guard’ by (i.e., they were prepared for) changes in the regime and therefore were less likely to ‘play up’ (described above).

In chapter four, we found that officers reported that using positive communication (i.e., honesty, directness, firmness) also facilitated positive working relationships between colleagues, which kept officers safe by establishing clear expectations among themselves. Officers thought that they were safer when they could honestly and directly communicate with colleagues because it established trust and officers knew their colleague would ‘have their back’ (i.e., support them, particularly during incidents of conflict or violence). Effective communication with colleagues was also vital for how smoothly the regime ran in a unit; when officers had a clear understanding of their role in the unit and what was expected of them during the regime (e.g., their tasks for the

day), the regime ran smoothly. This communication was also beneficial for officers' wellbeing because officers described having set tasks to complete, which meant that no one officer was burdened with 'picking up the slack' for their colleagues (a source of stress and emotional exhaustion found in previous literature; Clements & Kinman, 2021; Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015) and because prisoners received their minimum entitlements (e.g., allocated time unlocked from their cell) when they expected to (again, decreasing the likelihood that they would 'play up').

Theoretical Implications

An Ecological Approach to Examining Corrections Officer Safety

Most previous research examines single-level predictors of violence against officers: predominantly prisoner-, officer-, or prison-level characteristics. There is limited research that examines how these characteristics interact (e.g., who prisoner *and* officer characteristics interact) to affect the safety of corrections officers. One exception is the integrated social control-opportunity perspective by Steiner and Woolredge (2020), which offers an analysis of how individual and prison characteristics are associated with the perpetration of violence by prisoners toward officers (and toward other prisoners). However, while comprehensive, the above model primarily examines physical violence and does not examine how wider culture may also impact officers' perceptions of safety. Understanding how corrections officers construct their personal safety from an ecological perspective acknowledges that violence may not be solely explained by individual factors, nor is it solely explained by environmental factors. Rather, characteristics of prison environments, of those who live there, and of those who work there, interact to increase the likelihood of violence occurring (Tamatea et al., 2023). This thesis uses an ecological

approach to understand how the overall safety and wellbeing of officers is affected by their work in prison, including the wider culture of prisons.

Recall that the ecological perspective was first introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1974) in developmental psychology, who theorised that to understand the individual, we must also understand the layers of their life and how those layers interact to influence their behaviour. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory, this thesis contributes to our understanding of corrections officer safety from an ecological perspective by understanding how different layers of factors contribute to officers' perspectives of their safety. We propose that this ecology has three layers: beginning from the innermost layer of the ecology and working outwards, the innermost layer of officer safety begins at the individual level of corrections officers and prisoners. The next layer of the ecology consists of the working relationships officers have with prisoners and with colleagues, then the outermost layer of the ecology is the environmental level, which captures how organizational and cultural aspects of prison impact officer safety. We have previously discussed (above) how characteristics of prisoners, of officers, and of prisons are predictive of harm towards corrections officers and may impact officers' constructions of their personal safety. In this section we discuss the interactions between each type of factor to illustrate how corrections officer safety may be explained from an ecological approach.

Interactions between individual- and relationship-level characteristics. From an ecological perspective, relationship-level factors (e.g., officers' working relationships with prisoners) may be influenced by individual-level factors (e.g., officers' attitudes towards prisoners, level of experience). Notably, officers' perceptions of prisoners may contribute to whether they engage in relationship-building with prisoners. For instance, in chapter four,

officers who described humanizing perspectives of prisoners tended to strongly value building a rapport with them, which contributed to good working relationships (as previously discussed). On the other hand, as described by participants in chapter four, officers who took a traditional, security-focused approach to conducting their duties may be less engaged in building a rapport with prisoners because they may not consider relationship-building vital to their safety. We must acknowledge that officers can achieve safety and security without building a rapport with prisoners, however, as previously discussed, officers thought that having good relationships with prisoners made their job easier by prisoners being less oppositional during their interactions.

It is important to note that even how officers approach their role in prison or interact with prisoners (e.g., a humanizing perspective, a security-focused approach, using discretion) may be influenced by other individual-level characteristics such as their level of experience. For example, as described by officers in chapters four and five, less experienced officers may adopt a security-focused approach to prison work because they may be less confident in their abilities and therefore rely on closely following the formal rules to maintain their safety¹⁸. In doing so, these officers may strictly enforce rules and be considered ‘nit-picky’ by prisoners (and their colleagues), which may then hinder their ability to build good working relationships with prisoners (discussed above).

Some characteristics of *prisoners* may also impact how officers interact with them. For example, in manuscript three, officers described taking prisoners’ behavioural history into consideration when deciding whether to use discretion (i.e., use their professional judgement, as previously discussed). Being housed in directed segregation or having a higher security

¹⁸These attitudes may also be due to recency bias because less experienced or younger officers typically have been more recently exposed to formal training during the recruitment process, compared to older or more experienced officers.

classification may be indicative of misbehaviour in prison (e.g., being involved in violence), which officers take into consideration when deciding whether it is safe to relax rules with that prisoner or engage in relationship-building with that prisoner. Previous research suggests that the criminal history of prisoners may also influence whether officers engage in relationship-building with them; for example, officers may hold personal biases towards prisoners convicted of certain crimes (e.g., sex offences, offences against children; Greineder, 2013; Rothwell et al., 2021; Weekes et al., 1995). Although officers in our research did not disclose their own personal biases towards specific prisoners, this omission may be a factor of social desirability bias and not an accurate portrayal of officers' attitudes towards certain prisoners.

Interactions between environmental- and relationship-level characteristics.

Environmental factors that reduce the safety of officers may also impact officers' working relationships with colleagues and prisoners (i.e., the relationship-level of the ecology). In chapter five, officers described understaffing and prisoner crowding as factors that may hinder their ability to be fully aware of their surroundings and monitor the environment for potential conflict. From an ecological perspective, in units that are overcrowded with prisoners or understaffed, officers must prioritise completing the regime rather than building a rapport with prisoners or investing in their working relationships with colleagues. In previous research, many corrections officers report high or unrealistic workloads; we speculate that high workloads prevent officers from spending time building good working relationships with prisoners and colleagues. Considering previous research and the findings in this thesis, we suggest that environmental factors impact officer safety physically (e.g., reducing their ability to effectively monitor their surroundings, higher rates of violence against officers; Baggio et al., 2020; Steiner, 2009), emotionally (e.g., stress, fear, emotional exhaustion; Clements & Kinman, 2021; Ellison &

Gainey, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2020) and socially (i.e., increased workloads hinder officers from building relationships; Barkworth et al., 2023).

Staff culture is an environmental factor of prisons that impacts officer safety on both the individual-level and relationship-level of the ecology. On the individual level, the culture among staff in prisons can shape officers' attitudes towards their role. As we described in chapter four, during their initial training corrections officers are 'buddied up' with and observe experienced officers as they complete the daily regime. If there is a culture of cynicism or apathy among experienced officers, new officers may imitate this behaviour or feel pressured to express similar attitudes so they can 'fit in' with their colleagues (Dennehy & Nantel, 2006; Lambert et al., 2018b; Schultz, 2023). As such, officers who hold apathetic or cynical attitudes towards their work in prison may not attend to the individual needs of prisoners (compared to officers who hold humanizing perspectives of prisoners) in addition to completing the regime (Liebling & Kant, 2018). On the other hand, officers who model humanizing attitudes towards prisoners may encourage new officers to imitate this positive behaviour, which may help them develop a rapport with prisoners (and model the values of Hokai Rangi, Ara Poutama Aotearoa's strategic focus for humanizing the prison environment; Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2019). From an ecological perspective, these examples illustrate how the individual characteristic of an officer's attitude towards prison work may then contribute to the environmental characteristic of staff culture, which may then impact officer safety on the relationship-level by impacting their ability (or desire) to develop a rapport with prisoners.

In chapters two to six our findings have described how numerous aspects of working in prison contribute to the safety of corrections officers and their perspectives of safety; in this chapter we have discussed how these aspects interact across levels of the ecology. Understanding

corrections officer safety from an ecological perspective contributes to existing research by illustrating how different layers of prison work interact to impact officers' perceptions of safety.

A Holistic Understanding of Safety and Wellbeing

This thesis also contributes to our current understanding of corrections officer safety from a holistic perspective; that is, across chapters two to six, we have described how aspects of prison work contribute to the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing of corrections officers in New Zealand prisons. In this chapter, we discuss how these facets of wellbeing interact to affect the overall health of corrections officers. In previous research, it is widely acknowledged that wellbeing is multi-faceted and comprises of elements of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health (Durie, 1985; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011). Indeed, researchers across numerous fields (e.g., organizational psychology, positive psychology) have proposed models of wellbeing to understand how different facets of wellbeing interact (e.g., Six-factor Model of Wellbeing, PERMA theory, Te Whare Tapa Whā). Notably, in 1985, Sir Mason Durie proposed Te Whare Tapa Whā model of wellbeing to conceptualise Māori wellbeing (i.e., the wellbeing of indigenous people in New Zealand). Te Whare Tapa Whā comprises of four 'walls' (i.e., physical, emotional, social and spiritual health) and posits that these walls must be in balance for an individual to thrive; when one wall is lacking, the overall wellbeing of a person is decreased and they cannot truly thrive (Durie, 1985).

Throughout this thesis we have described officer safety in terms of each pillar of wellbeing. First, in chapters two and three, we examined the physical safety of corrections officers by identifying predictors of violence by prisoners towards officers. Then, in chapter four, we examined how officers' social wellbeing at work influenced their physical safety, by understanding how the working relationships of officers kept them safe. In chapter five, we

identified how officers maintained their physical wellbeing using strategies while interacting with prisoners. Finally, in chapter six we explored how working in prison impacted the emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing of officers. In this chapter, we discuss how these different pillars of wellbeing interact to contribute to the holistic wellbeing of officers.

Interactions between physical and emotional wellbeing. Consistent with previous research, it was clear that the physical stress of prison work decreased the emotional wellbeing of officers by contributing to experiences of stress and emotional exhaustion (Clements & Kinman, 2021; Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Steiner & Woolredge, 2015). Over time, the physical demands of being constantly alert, coupled with long shifts and overexertion attributed to understaffing, contributed to officers becoming emotionally exhausted and burnt out (i.e., a state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress), therefore reducing their emotional wellbeing. In chapter six, some officers described using negative coping strategies (i.e., mechanisms that provide temporary relief but that may reduce their wellbeing long term) to manage the demands of their role, such as problematic alcohol use. These negative coping strategies present a damaging cycle: officers may use alcohol to alleviate their emotional exhaustion caused by the physical demands of their role, however, problematic alcohol use may then decrease the physical wellbeing of officers over time and contribute to further emotional exhaustion (Campion & Nurse 2007). On the other hand, some officers described using positive coping strategies to manage or relieve stress, such as exercise and massages. Using positive strategies may present a beneficial cycle: officers may exercise to relieve stress from work and in doing so, may become fitter and stronger, and perhaps better equipped to handle the physicality of their role (e.g., long shifts, restraining prisoners). Alternatively, some officers may use exercise to purposefully become stronger and fitter, as a tool to create a “confident, non-vulnerable self-

presentation” (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013, p. 110) that prisoners may respect and be hesitant to challenge, therefore increasing their safety and wellbeing (Ricciardelli & Gazso, 2013).

Interactions between physical and social wellbeing. Officers described the physical stress of their role impacting their wellbeing outside of work, a finding that was consistent with the work-family-conflict model of strain which posits that behaviour that enables officers to be successful at work may be detrimental to an officers’ personal life at home (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Higgins et al., 2022b). In chapter six, officers thought the physical strain of being a corrections officer contributed to high levels of fatigue which reduced their social wellbeing outside of work. Officers also described the physical demands (e.g., long shifts, overtime) of their role interfering with their family life. Some officers described being so exhausted from their work that they did not have the energy to spend time with their family and instead spent their personal time recovering from their shift and preparing for their next shift. As such, officers’ fatigue from their work then reduced their social health by weakening their social bonds with family and friends outside of work.

On the other hand, officers’ poor social wellbeing at work may also have a negative impact on their physical wellbeing. As discussed previously, the staff culture among officers may contribute to an ‘in-group’ mentality where officers adjust their behaviour (e.g., attitudes towards prisoners or their role) to increase their sense of belonging with their colleagues (Crawley & Crawley, 2008). In chapter four, we found that officers outside of the ‘in-group’ (i.e., officers who described poor working relationships with colleagues) did not think they could rely on their colleagues to aid them if they were under duress (e.g., if a prisoner was aggressive, if a prisoner assaulted them). Because they are unsure if their colleagues would protect them, these officers may protect *themselves* by being constantly hyper-alert, which could then reduce their physical

wellbeing by contributing to high levels of overexertion, stress and exhaustion (Higgins et al., 2023).

Interactions between emotional and social wellbeing. The finding that officers' work in prison may impact their home life aligns with previous research that examines how prison work 'bleeds over' into officers' personal lives; some officers who experience trauma at work (impacting their emotional health) may isolate themselves from their family and friends, therefore also impacting their social health (Higgins et al., 2022b). Officers may also purposefully isolate themselves from their family and friends due to the emotional turmoil that some officers experience from their work (Higgins et al., 2022b). In their role, corrections officers are exposed to potentially traumatic events, including violence, prisoner self-harm or suicide, and verbal abuse (Boudoukha et al., 2013; Coulling et al., 2024; Higgins et al., 2022b). These experiences that officers may encounter in prison may reduce their emotional health by contributing to high levels of stress, fear, and high levels of PTSD symptoms (Boudoukha et al., 2013). In turn, these experiences may also reduce officers' social wellbeing by officers distancing themselves from their family, either to protect their family (by not sharing the extent of what they experience at work) or because 'outsiders' (i.e., people who do not work in prison) do not understand their experiences (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Higgins et al., 2022b; Johnston et al., 2024). On the other hand, being isolated from their family and friends may encourage officers to build stronger working relationships with colleagues to receive social support from people who understand their experiences (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Higgins et al., 2022b).

Understanding corrections officer wellbeing from a holistic perspective contributes to future research because it identifies how factors of prison work can affect multiple facets of wellbeing, rather than impacting officers in a silo. For instance, previous research has established

that understaffing reduces the physical health of officers because officers' workloads increase and they become more fatigued (Clements & Kinman, 2021). From a holistic perspective, in this thesis we suggest that by decreasing officers' physical health, understaffing may also decrease officers' emotional and social wellbeing by contributing to emotional exhaustion and social isolation. As such, future research may further consider how one factor of prison work may reduce the safety of officers in multiple different ways.

Practical Implications

Identifying Risky Factors for Serious Violence Against Officers

In chapters two and three, we identified prisoner characteristics, officer characteristics, and environmental characteristics that were predictive of serious violence by prisoners towards corrections officers. As we discussed above when addressing research question one, there is limited previous research that examines predictors of prisoner-to-officer violence at different severities. Rather, most research identifies predictors of *any* violence against officers. In contrast, this thesis identifies predictors of violence of different severities; notably, predictors of *serious* violence against corrections officers (i.e., violence that results in the most severe, long-lasting injuries against officers).

Previous research defines physical violence in different ways; some research only includes violence that causes injury, while other research (including this thesis) captures any physical contact by prisoners towards officers (e.g., a push). From a practical perspective, it is important to discriminate between any violence and violence that causes serious harm to officers in order to identify which situations may escalate. For example, by triangulating the findings of chapters two and three, we know that younger prisoners were more likely to perpetrate serious violence against officers compared to older prisoners and we also know that serious violence

most commonly occurred during movements compared to other tasks in the regime. Taken together, moving younger prisoners around the unit may be a particularly risky time for officers to be seriously assaulted. By identifying the most dangerous situations for officers, prison management may prioritise resources to better protect officers, such as lowering the ratio of prisoners to officers during these tasks (i.e., only moving a few prisoners at a time, requiring more officers during these tasks). This research suggests that prison management triage resources according to the potential harm that officers may sustain and supports these strategies to protect officers that are likely already being implemented by prison management.

Improved Training to Produce “More Good Staff”

Perhaps the most important finding that emerged from this research was that many corrections officers in our interview sample did not think they had adequate resources to complete their duties safely. Indeed, when we asked officers what could improve their safety at work, most participants simply said “more staff”. But, it is important to note that officers did not think that just increasing the *number* of corrections officers would improve their safety: officers specified that they required “more *good* staff”. However, simply increasing resources in prison is not realistic; therefore, guided by the interview results from manuscripts three and four, these results confirm the importance of investing in the training of corrections officers to produce “more good staff”.

First, most officers in our research acknowledged that the initial training that new officers receive at Ara Poutama Aotearoa is comprehensive and adequately prepares officers for their responsibilities in prison. However, officers identified what they saw as weaknesses in the ongoing training for established corrections officers (i.e., the ‘refresher training’) and offered specific suggestions to address those deficits. The deficits that officers identified with the

physical skills (e.g., control and restraint) refresher training focused on the content and timing of the training.

Officers explained that they only refreshed physical skills and not soft skills (e.g., verbal de-escalation) and officers thought there was a lack of training to progress their skills (i.e., refresher training was a review of already-taught skills, not an opportunity to progress those skills). Taken together with our findings from chapters four and five—that officers considered communication and relationship-building to be their most valuable skills for keeping safe—our findings suggest that officers would also benefit from refreshing soft skills (e.g., communication, professional judgement). Further, officers thought they would benefit from additional opportunities to *advance* their skills (e.g., advanced communication skills, management skills). For example, officers who had progressed to middle management positions described a deficit in training where they did not receive any formal management skills training alongside their promotion but instead relied on their colleagues to support their professional development. Regarding timing, officers thought that refresher training was too infrequent and too condensed. Officers suggested that to truly ‘refresh’ their skills, ongoing training should occur every six months (instead of annually) because over the year officers became less confident when using strategies to maintain their safety. Further, long-standing officers who had attended refresher training over the years thought that the current training was rushed (e.g., officers refreshed their skills but not the context surrounding those skills, such as why they might choose one technique over another).

From a practical viewpoint, and acknowledging the resource constraints of Ara Poutama Aotearoa, our findings suggest that staff think the refresher training should be completed by officers more frequently and the training should be expanded to capture the nuances of strategies,

rather than only refreshing the physical skills themselves. Improving the refresher training for corrections officers would improve the overall safety of officers by producing “more good staff” with better developed, and a better range of, skills (e.g., control and restraint *and* verbal de-escalation) that have been recently reviewed. These improvements could increase corrections officers’ confidence in their skills and enable them to develop more advanced application of skills, as noted above.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Mixed-method Approach

The main strength of this thesis was that throughout the research presented, we used a mixed-methods approach for understanding corrections officer safety (an approach that has been recommended in previous research; Clark, 2017; Watsi et al., 2022). In doing so, we quantitatively captured overarching patterns that were present in prison and qualitatively examined the lived experiences of corrections officers to understand how officers themselves constructed their own safety. By analysing the electronic database of prisoner-to-officer assaults we statistically identified predictors of serious violence against officers, which established an empirical foundation for our research and provided a basis for the interview schedule that we used during interviews with officers in manuscripts three and four, which therefore influenced the development of our grounded theory. Using a mixed-methods approach was a strength of this research because it allowed us to understand what decreased corrections officer safety at multiple levels (i.e., an ecological approach) and to identify how the overall safety and wellbeing of officers was impacted by their work in prison (i.e., a holistic approach).

This mixed-methodology also allowed us to triangulate some of our findings across manuscripts: interviews with officers provided support for, or contextualised, the quantitative

results of chapters two and three. By triangulating our findings, we were able to form connections between our grounded theory and the patterns that emerged from our quantitative analyses. For example, as previously discussed, in manuscript one we identified prisoner characteristics that were predictive of them perpetrating serious violence against officers. We could then ask corrections officers whether there were particular prisoners that they felt more or less safe interacting with, which aligned with our previous findings and offered a richer explanation of those quantitative results.

Data and Participant Recruitment

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of this research is that all data sources only offered one perspective of violence and safety in prison, that is, the perspective of corrections officers. The electronic database we quantitatively analysed only captured incidents of violence that corrections officers reported, the incident reports we manually coded were written by corrections officers involved in the incident, and we also only interviewed corrections officers. As such, this research did not examine prisoners' perspectives of their violence against corrections officers. This is a limitation because we relied on what officers *thought* prisoners were thinking which—depending on officers' level of experience and rapport with prisoners—could be somewhat accurate; however, we cannot assess the validity of their speculations. A notable finding impacted by this limitation was in chapter three, how we coded factors that may have motivated prisoners to assault officers. In their incident reports, officers speculated about, or sometimes did not include any information about, what they thought motivated the assault, which resulted in poor quality or missing data. Even during interviews with officers, they could not undeniably confirm why prisoners used violence against officers, but again, could only speculate. Although we referred to previous research when interpreting these findings and attempted to triangulate

our findings across data sources, the lack of other perspectives in this thesis was a limitation of the research.

Because our research did not include prisoners' perspectives of their violence against corrections officers, we suggest that future research incorporate both officer and prisoner perspectives when examining prisoners' violence against officers (for an example of research including prisoners' perspectives see Morrison et al., 2021) In particular, in chapter three we suggested that prisoners may perpetrate violence against officers in two ways: reactively (e.g., in response to interactions with officers or in response to the prison environment) or instrumentally (i.e., planned violence with an intentional purpose). However, the causes of violence against officers may not be so simple; for example, prisoners may purposefully use violence in certain conditions (e.g., in specific locations or times of day) to react to interactions that occurred previously (e.g., previous interactions with officers). Some previous research has examined how (or whether) prisoners decide to assault officers; however, this research is not currently available in the public domain. Therefore, we suggest that future external or independent research address these questions. Are there specific conditions that prisoners may require to assault officers, such as having no other officers around? What do prisoners consider when weighing up their decision to use violence against officers? What interactions may prompt prisoners to respond with violence against officers, compared to violence that is planned? Future research may also examine why prisoners may assault officers instead of prisoners. Previous research indicates that prisoners may use violence as a form of communication (Brabyn et al., 2023; Patrick, 1998; Trammel, 2012); does this means of communication differ according to who the victim is? Is violence against officers a form of protest against prison as an institution (as proposed by deprivation theory; Sykes, 1958) and is violence against other prisoners simply to establish their

position in the prison hierarchy? To thoroughly examine prisoners' perspectives of their perpetration of violence against officers, we suggest that future research untangle what motivates prisoners to assault officers while considering why they decide to assault officers compared to other prisoners. Future research may also examine prisoners' decision-making and motivations to assault officers with an ecological lens by understanding how multiple factors (e.g., individual, relationship and environment characteristics) may influence prisoners' thought processes.

Regarding the quantitative data provided by Ara Poutama Aotearoa, it is important to acknowledge the intense resourcing constraints that corrections officers report they experience at work. According to their accounts, officers do not have sufficient time in their day to spend time writing incident reports. Although organisational policy requires them to write incident reports to document any incidents that occur in prison; they typically do not write reports with the intention of providing rich, high quality data for research. Considering the resourcing constraints and purpose of writing incident reports, it is therefore not surprising that some data analysed in this research included poor quality or missing data.

One other limitation of this thesis was the use of snowball sampling to recruit corrections officers for interviews. We started by interviewing a small group of officers who had been involved in a previous study outside of this thesis (but for the same overarching project, Nga Tūmanakotanga) and who had indicated that they would be open to being contacted for the current research. After interviewing each participant, we asked them to refer us to current or former colleagues who may potentially be interested in being interviewed. Snowball sampling has the potential limitation of reducing the sample heterogeneity (Ting et al., 2025), where participants referred colleagues who shared similar values to them, which then potentially reduced the variability of data. To minimise the potential limitation of snowball sampling, we did

include current *and* former corrections officers in our sample, which at times offered contrasting perspectives and experiences of working for Ara Poutama Aotearoa. In doing so, we mitigated the potential bias of current officers being hesitant to criticise their employer. We also recruited some interview participants by approaching corrections officers across several sites which contributed to variability in the data. However, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of participants were still recruited through contact with previous participants.

Analytical Process

As previously discussed, one important contribution of this research is that we have explored different aspects of corrections officer safety from a holistic perspective (chapter six). In doing so, we have begun to establish how aspects of working in prison reduce officer wellbeing in one way, which then may impact other facets of wellbeing (described above). However, in this thesis, we did not conduct selective coding of these data or develop an overarching model (as we did in chapters four and five), but instead simply described the categories that emerged. Further, it is important to acknowledge that although we have described interactions between different variables that may impact the safety of corrections officers from an ecological approach, in our quantitative research (chapters two and three) we did not conduct multilevel modelling to empirically support this approach. Low sample sizes (either directly from the electronic database or resulting from how we defined and coded variables) meant our data did not meet the assumptions for more sophisticated analyses than those that we conducted. In manuscript one, although our sample size of incidents of violence by prisoners towards officers was adequate, other variables prevented us from conducting multilevel or nested analyses (Maas & Hox, 2005). For example, although the electronic database contained 1647 incidents of violence that occurred across 285 different units in New Zealand prisons, in only 8

units (2.81%) did 30 or more incidents occur (in 249 units fewer than 10 incidents occurred during the sampling period, 78 of these units only having one incident). Further, in manuscript two, we began with a small sample size ($n = 151$) which we then coded across multiple variables (e.g., we coded the motivations for the assault into eight different categories). Some categories had fewer than five counts, which violated the assumptions of some analyses and required us to use exact analyses (e.g., Fisher's exact test) during the analytical process. Because our small sample sizes prevented us from conducting more complex analyses, we suggest that future research examine violence against officers by extending the selection criteria (e.g., including perpetrators who were women) or by extending the sampling timeframe (e.g., extending the data collection period from five years to ten years) to achieve adequate sample sizes.

Future research may also take a holistic approach to examine which characteristics of prison decrease multiple facets of officer wellbeing directly (e.g., being physically assaulted may cause injury and psychological distress). By identifying characteristics of prison work that reduce multiple facets of wellbeing directly, future research may identify aspects of prison that cause the most harm to officers. Further, future research may explore to what extent characteristics of prison (or events that occur in prison) affect different facets of officer wellbeing. For example, officers may be presented with a variety of incidents in prison, ranging from mundane (e.g., moving prisoners) to potentially traumatic (e.g., being assaulted, witnessing violence, using physical force against prisoners) and rate the extent to which that incident may impact their perceived physical, emotional or social wellbeing. Finally, future research may identify strategies most effective for preventing violence against corrections officers or for increasing officer safety. For instance, future research may implement a longitudinal study to

examine whether different strategies (e.g., investing in relationship-building, prioritising verbal de-escalation) reduce rates of violence towards corrections officers.

Conclusion

The findings in this thesis suggest that to understand how corrections officers' safety is impacted by their work in prison, we must understand how multiple different factors of prison contribute to the holistic wellbeing of corrections officers. Moreover, by identifying factors of prison that predict more serious violence by prisoners towards officers, this thesis identifies situations in prison where corrections officers are most at risk of sustaining severe, long-lasting injuries. In doing so, these findings support a need for more resources, including more well-trained officers, to better protect the people that manage prisoners in Aotearoa New Zealand. Finally, throughout the research presented in thesis, we have explored how corrections officers *themselves* construct their own safety at work and how their work can have a detrimental impact on their life outside of work. By taking a mixed-methods approach, this thesis has both identified overarching patterns of violence against corrections officers in New Zealand prisons and has also included the perspectives of those who work in prisons everyday.

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Appendix A: Co-authorship Forms



Co-Authorship Form

School of Graduate Research
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240, New Zealand
Phone +64 7 838 5096
Email: SGR@waikato.ac.nz
Website: <http://www.waikato.ac.nz/students/research-degree>

This form is to accompany the submission of any PhD that contains research reported in published or unpublished co-authored work. **Please include one copy of this form for each co-authored work.** Completed forms should be included in your appendices for all the copies of your thesis submitted for examination and library deposit (including digital deposit).

Please indicate the chapter/section/pages of this thesis that are extracted from a co-authored work and give the title and publication details or details of submission of the co-authored work.

Chapter two: Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2024). Predicting physical violence against corrections officers across three levels of severity using individual and environmental characteristics. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 17, 1-26.

Nature of contribution
by PhD candidate

Analysed data, wrote the paper.

Extent of contribution
by PhD candidate (%)

70

CO-AUTHORS

Name	Nature of Contribution
Assoc. Prof. Armon Tamata	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper.
Prof. Devon Polaschek	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper.

Certification by Co-Authors

The undersigned hereby certify that:

- ❖ the above statement correctly reflects the nature and extent of the PhD candidate's contribution to this work, and the nature of the contribution of each of the co-authors; and
- ❖ that the candidate wrote all or the majority of the text.

Name	Signature	Date
Samantha Storm Taaka		11.11.2025
Assoc. Prof. Armon Tamatea		21/10/25
Prof. Devon Polaschek		November 3, 2025



Co-Authorship Form

School of Graduate Research
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240, New Zealand
Phone +64 7 838 5096
Email: SGR@waikato.ac.nz
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Please indicate the chapter/section/pages of this thesis that are extracted from a co-authored work and give the title and publication details or details of submission of the co-authored work.

Chapter two: Taaka, S. S., Tamatea, A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2025). Corrections officers' working relationships in prison and their effect on officers' perceived safety. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

Nature of contribution
by PhD candidate

Analysed data, wrote the paper.

Extent of contribution
by PhD candidate (%)

70

CO-AUTHORS

Name	Nature of Contribution
Assoc. Prof. Armon Tamata	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper.
Prof. Devon Polaschek	Provided feedback, and support for data collection, analysis, and writing the paper.

Certification by Co-Authors

The undersigned hereby certify that:

- ❖ the above statement correctly reflects the nature and extent of the PhD candidate's contribution to this work, and the nature of the contribution of each of the co-authors; and
- ❖ that the candidate wrote all or the majority of the text.

Name	Signature	Date
Samantha Storm Taaka		11.11.2025
Assoc. Prof. Armon Tamatea		21/10/25
Prof. Devon Polaschek		November 3, 2025

Appendix B: Supplemental Materials for Manuscripts Three and Four

Participant information sheet and consent form



Participant Information Sheet

Study title: **Correctional officer safety at work: Exploring staff perceptions through interviews**

Lead investigator: **Samantha Taaka**

You are invited to take part in a research project to understand **how you as a correctional staff member feel about your safety as you go about your work each day**. The research is part of a bigger project on how to make prisons safer. We are interested to collect and understand your views, experiences, and observations about prison violence.

This information sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. When we have gone through all the information, if you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a *consent form*. You will be given a copy of both the information sheet and the consent form to keep.

This piece of the research is being undertaken by Samantha Taaka (Tainui; Te Arawa), a PhD student in Psychology at the University of Waikato. Samantha's research is being supervised by Professor Devon Polaschek and Dr Armon Tamatea (*Rongowhākāta; Te Aitanga-A-Māhaki*), both academic staff at the University of Waikato and registered clinical psychologists with a long background in research with people in prisons.

We are planning to interview a number of correctional officers across a variety of units and prison and we will put together all of the information from all of the hui for analysis. The aim is not to describe the people we interviewed or what each individual said. Rather we are interested in safety itself: we want to map out the concept of safety for staff and the links to it causes and consequences. After interviews are transcribed we will analyse them as we go along. When the work is finished, it will be part of Sam Taaka's PhD thesis, and are likely to write it up for publication in scientific journals and technical reports. We plan to talk about it at conferences too. If you would like, we can send you a summary of the results to an email or snail mail address in the community. We think the final results will be done by mid-2024.

Participation is voluntary. Whether or not you take part will not affect how you are treated in prison. If you do decide to take part and then change your mind, that is fine too. Just let us know. If we have already started audio recording the hui we will ask you if we can keep the information you already provided or just wipe the recording completely. You do not need to answer any particular question if you don't want to. You may also withdraw from the project within 10 days of receiving your interview transcript by contacting the researcher by email or phone. If you do decide to withdraw from the study, your recording will be wiped and your transcript deleted.

If you agree to take part, as a thank-you for your expertise we would like to offer you a supermarket voucher.

The hui will be confidential. We will record just the sound (audio) part of it and later that will be used to make a written version of what was said at the hui. Your name will not be included in that recording. Once we have it written down, we will wipe the audio recording. The written version will be securely stored on University of Waikato servers for 5 years after the findings of the study have been released.

The only exception to confidentiality is that if as a result of what you say to us, we think that you are someone else is at immediate risk of serious harm, we might need to break confidentiality to warn someone who could stop that harm. If we do have that concern, we would seek to discuss our concern with you first, if that was possible.

We don't think there are any immediate risks to you from participating in this research. We will check in with you about how you are feeling during the interview, and if you do become upset while you are talking to us, we will do our best to help you get settled again. And if you need additional support, we can talk through other options with you such as talking to a chosen colleague or manager, or a referral to EAP services. If you want to seek your own additional support, contacting your GP for a referral is another option. With your permission we can also check in on you by phone the day after the interview, to see how things are going.

More often participants in research like this report some benefits. They often say that they find taking part is a positive experience, and they like the idea of helping to make prisons safer in the future, which is an aim of the overall research programme.

We will be interviewing around 30 correctional officers, and we will analyse the interviews as we go along. When the work is finished, we are likely to write it up for publication in scientific journals and technical reports. We plan to talk about it at conferences too. If you would like, we can send you a summary of the results to your email. If you would like to receive a summary of results, we can make a note of that on your consent form now, or if you decide later on that you want a summary, you can simply email us then to let us know. We think the final results will be done in the second half of 2024.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the study at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact the project leads, who will be happy to talk to you:

Professor Devon Polaschek or Dr Armon Tamatea or Samantha Taaka, School of Psychology , Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences, Te Whare Wānanga O Waikato / University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105 , Hamilton 3240

Email: sst11@students.waikato.ac.nz (Samantha Taaka);
devon.polaschek@waikato.ac.nz ph. 07-8389224 or armon.tamatea@waikato.ac.nz, Ph: 07-8585157

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Health) at the University of Waikato as HREC (Health)2021#91, and by Ara Poutama Aotearoa's Research and Evaluation Steering Committee. Any questions or concerns about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to:

Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee (Health), Te Whare Wānanga O Waikato / University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240; Email: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz



Consent Form: Correctional officer safety at work: Exploring staff perceptions through interviews

Please tick to indicate you consent to the following

I have read, or have had read to me, the Participant Information Sheet. I have been able to ask and get answers to any questions that I had.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I have been given sufficient time to consider whether or not to participate in this study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I understand that taking part in this study is my choice and that I may withdraw from the study within 10 days after receiving my interview transcript. Withdrawing will not affect my sentence or management under Ara Poutama Aotearoa, and I may request the removal of all my data from the study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I understand that my participation in this study is confidential and my information will be anonymous in the research analysis.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I wish to receive a summary of the results from the study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to accept a voucher to thank me for my participation.	Yes ☐ No ☐
I would appreciate a follow up phone call tomorrow to check in on how I am doing. My preferred phone number is _____	Yes ☐ No ☐

Declaration by participant:

I consent to take part in this study.

Participant's name: _____

Oral consent given, via (researcher's name):

Or Participant signature _____

Date: _____ Unit/Site: _____

Please send a summary of the results to me at this address (summaries should be available from late 2024).

Please send voucher to _____ at this address _____

Indicative interview topics

Tell us a bit about your usual job/role at the moment. What have you been doing recently as a CO?

- Where they work, roles, colleagues, prisoners, type of regime in unit. If rotating units regularly etc.
- How long have you worked in Corrections for?
- How does your current role compare to previous roles you have had (e.g., contact with prisoners, shifts, colleagues).
- How do your family view your job?
- FORMER: What was your main reason for leaving Corrections?

Perception of safety/general feelings of safety during a typical shift

- Overall sense of safety, variation for location, time of day, colleagues, prisoners around them, roles/activities
- Do you ever talk about safety or feelings of safety with your colleagues?

Fear of victimisation or perceived risk of being assaulted by a prisoner or staff member

- How worried are you about being assaulted?
- What types of experiences do they most fear with respect to harm to them?
- How likely do they think they are etc. (e.g., assault, hostage taking, getting infectious diseases).

Actual experience of victimisation including assault, verbal abuse, threats.

- Did you report them? Were you satisfied with outcomes if so. If not, why not.
- Did you feel supported by management and colleagues after being assaulted?
- What sort of support did you receive after you were assaulted?

Current stress levels more generally

- How often at work feel satisfied, enjoying work. What contributes to this?
- How often experience various stress-related emotions (frustrated, on edge, burned out, frightened).
- Sought any help? Do you need any?
- To what extent does safety at work or lack of it contribute to current job satisfaction, or affect you or your whānau at home.
- What sort of things do you do to manage stress?
- Are you able to switch out of work mode easily?
- What sort of things help you switch out of work mode?
- Ways to handle stress/the job?

What do they think of the training and equipment they have available for working safely.

- What are some improvements you would make to equipment for your safety?
- What do you think about the training for new recruits?

Perception or relationships with management and colleagues

- Contribution of prison management and policies to perceived safety.
- Contributions of colleagues to perceived safety.
- Any actions they have taken if they had concerns.
- What makes a good colleague?
- Do you behave differently around different colleagues?
- Are there any colleagues that you find challenging to work with?

Perceptions of prisoners

- How they manage relationships with prisoners to keep self safe.
- Whether they think prisoners would have their back in feared event etc.
- What kind of orientation do they have to their prisoners. For instance how are they balancing the “guard/helper” role?
- How would you describe your relationships with prisoners in general?

Hokai Rangi

- Has Hokai Rangi affected your view of how safe prisons are for staff?
- If so, how?
- If not, why do you think this is the case?
- Has Hokai Rangi affected your relationship with prisoners?
- How do you think prisoners view Hokai Rangi?

COVID-19

- How has COVID-19 affected your safety at work or your perceptions of staff safety more generally?
- How are things now in prison following COVID?

What are some of the things you routinely do to help make your workplace safer for yourself?

- How have you adapted your work to make you feel safer?
- What are some things you do inside the prison to make yourself safer?
- What are some things you do outside of prison (in your everyday life) to make yourself safer at work?

Improvements for safety

- What else could be improved to make you feel safer while working?

Future of the job

- How likely do you think it is that you will still be working as a CO for AP in 6 months?
- Would you recommend working in Corrections to family or friends?
- FORMER: What, if anything, would have kept you in Corrections?
- FORMER: Did anything prompt you to leave?