

Higher Education and the Recruitment, Training, and Retention of Community Corrections Personnel in the Coming Era of Criminal Justice Reform

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THE CALL FOR reform in the criminal justice system is now full-throated (e.g., Gentithes, 2021). Widely publicized incidents of the mistreatment of primarily nonwhite individuals have led to an overall skepticism, if not outright distrust, of the entire justice process, particularly by nonwhite Americans (Kochal, 2019). It is nearly impossible to ignore reports in the media of defunding the police, addressing systemic biases in the justice process toward nonwhites, and ending mass incarceration. The summer of 2020 saw nationwide protests about police misuse of force in the wake of George Floyd's death and other incidents involving unarmed African-Americans (Ralph, 2020). In addition, there has been a move to target practices that support bias further along in the justice process, such as excessive bail (Monaghan, van Holm, & Surprenant, 2020) and risk assessment instruments resulting in disparate results for nonwhites (Vincent & Viljoen, 2020). How criminal justice is administered in the United States will be debated and scrutinized in coming years, and it is likely that the justice system will need to evolve in response to calls for change. The question becomes: What will the next generation justice system look like and what are the skill sets needed to make it work as designed?

One aspect of reforming the justice system that receives little attention is community corrections. This is curious considering that reinvention of offender treatment and control

will require an expansion of community corrections structures and direction of greater resources toward this entity that oversees justice-involved persons for the longest duration. Similarly, *who* staffs these positions will be as important as *which* policies are implemented. While the greatest focus is (and is likely to remain) on recruiting and training peace officers, identifying probation and parole officers who are committed to a rehabilitative ideal and preventing reoffending are paramount. Fifteen years after a detailed analysis of community corrections staffing and culture at the turn of the 21st century (and recommendations for moving forward) was produced by the National Institute of Corrections (Stinchcomb, McCampbell, & Layman, 2006), the attempts at reform can be described succinctly; they feed appearance but starve reality. This article examines a number of the points made in that report to determine whether progress has been made, and which course corrections are appropriate now, within the current debate on criminal justice reform in the United States.

Recruiting the Next Generation of Community Corrections Professionals—Who Should They Be and What Is the Role of Higher Education?

White males historically populated community corrections work, as they did most

components of the American justice process (Rosich, 2007). Two decades into the 21st century, women comprise a greater proportion of probation officers than men, and a majority of all officers are bilingual (zippia.com, 2021). The percentage of nonwhite probation officers increased steadily throughout the 2000s and 2010s, so that by 2018, probation officers who identified as nonwhite had increased from approximately 36 percent at the beginning of the 21st century to more than 40 percent (zippia.com, 2021). Toward the later decades of the 20th century, the primary focus of community corrections shifted, via a reimagined set of strategies placed under the umbrella term “intermediate sanctions,” to supervision of offenders and ensuring “community safety” (Byrne, 2008; Byrne, Lurigio, & Petersilia, 1992; Wodahl & Garland, 2009). Within such a model, probation and parole officers were incentivized to uncover violations and to initiate revocations of release or terms of sanctions, if for no other reason than to reduce the size of their caseloads. Irrespective of the reasoning behind these revocations, available data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) demonstrate the steep increase in the percentage of new admissions to prison due to probation and parole violations (Corbett Jr., 2015). In the late 1970s, this figure was approximately 16 percent, increasing to 36 percent by 2008, and settling at 28 percent by 2018 (Deng, 2020). These numbers do not

include the revocations of probation or parole for individuals being housed in local jails (Deng, 2020). Other estimates that include all forms of detention indicate the percentage of those behind bars for probation or parole violations at 45 percent in 2017 (The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2019).

Shifts in national demographics along with deliberate changes in recruiting tactics will all but guarantee that the next generation of community corrections professionals will be the most diverse ever. Unfortunately, in human terms diversity equals staff with a lived experience of bias and discrimination. These individuals will come into the field with a lifetime of accrued evidence implicating the justice system as a biased set of component parts. From police misuse of force to the disproportionate mass incarceration of people of color, new justice system personnel will come into organizations that are perceived by staff as in need of reform or dismantling. The implications are profound. The idea that younger individuals' perceptions of the legitimacy of the law and its agents are influenced by a number of social entities, including parents, has been empirically established (e.g., Wolfe, McLean, & Pratt, 2017). Will these same attitudes hold relative to the dismantling of these institutions? If the idea is widely held that systemic bias renders these institutions illegitimate, it stands to reason that these ideas will be internalized by the newest generation of justice system personnel, and they will be the catalysts for systemic change. Alternatively, it is possible that some recruits will see calls for systemic change as unwarranted, and view the attention given to reform as "fake news." This situation could result in a volatile workplace.

There is evidence from the analyses of students majoring in criminal justice to suggest that the new generation of justice personnel, including those working in community corrections, will be the most diverse in terms of gender identity, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and political ideology (e.g., Cunningham Stringer & Murphy, 2020; Gabbidon, Penn, & Richards, 2003). Demographic information on college and university students majoring in criminal justice demonstrates this change (e.g., Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019). Evidence is also found in empirical assessments completed in decades past (Austin & Hummer, 1994; Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003). However, even if the new generation is different in terms of background characteristics, the question lingers: What changes are necessary in the organizational

culture, given fundamental differences in how the role of the justice system is perceived in larger society, and the philosophy of punishment held, particularly by those endeavoring to enter the community corrections field? Any discussion of recruiting community corrections personnel is rooted in larger discussions of the philosophy of punishment as it applies to community supervision. Without a coherent and widely understood organizational mission, community corrections agencies will continue to recruit and acculturate new personnel "as has always been done," meaning the organizational culture will define the employee, as opposed to the inverse. Prior research has shown that students majoring in criminal justice trend higher on assessments of punitiveness (e.g., Farnworth, Longmire, & West, 1998; Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Ridener & Kuehn, 2017), though there are elements of the higher education experience that may offset previously held views (e.g., Calaway, Callais, & Lightner, 2016; O'Connor Shelley, Waid, & Dobbs, 2011).¹

To an extent, students who come to the criminal justice major represent national perspectives on the operation of the justice system. There certainly are those who come to the field determined to effect change in a system that is seen to have issues of legitimacy, but a larger proportion choose the major based on their perceptions of the role the system plays in American society. Over time, criminal justice majors have reported fairly consistent rationales for choosing the justice professions, such as the perceived excitement of the work (Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999) or exposure to the field by family members (Cunningham Stringer & Murphy, 2020). An enduring characteristic of criminal justice majors is the draw toward law enforcement as a career aspiration within the justice system. The majority of criminal justice majors have reported a desire to enter law enforcement dating back to the first programs in police science and administration of justice, while those endeavoring toward community or institutional corrections remain fewer, though that gap may be narrowing (Cunningham Stringer & Murphy, 2020).

Recruiting efforts that target candidates from spheres other than criminal justice students, or other than higher education at all, will undoubtedly focus on diversifying the

existing community corrections workforce. Historically, the perceptions of corrections personnel in general have been monochrome in terms of institutional legitimacy and purpose; specifically, community corrections philosophy has been entwined with and has followed that of institutional corrections (Lutze, Johnson, Clear, Latessa, & Slate, 2012). This has resulted in community corrections focusing more on offender supervision and less on the rehabilitative aspects associated with alternative sanctions. However, as calls to dismantle the mass incarceration apparatus become louder, this may be the inflection point needed for community corrections to disentangle from serving as the entity for post-release supervision primarily, and become the means by which a more just philosophy of offender management takes hold.

It is evident that community corrections has made the move toward "knowledge workers" and that this trend will continue, with the need for personnel with solid critical thinking skills a desired commodity (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Certainly there is no shortage of such individuals with aspirations toward a career in the justice field, but what are the best strategies for matching specific applicants to agencies? Down which avenues for recruiting should community corrections proceed in order to attract workers who best exemplify a more desistance-based and support-focused approach to offender management? There is little doubt that the field will face recruitment challenges similar to those experienced by law enforcement agencies, particularly large urban departments (e.g., Morrow, Vickovic, & Shjarback, 2021). The question is: What will they do about it?

Students from academic disciplines such as social work, psychology, sociology, human development and family studies, and education may be better equipped for positions within a reimagined community corrections system. Sometimes labeled the "helping professions," for years there has been considerable overlap and cooperation between, for example, those working in juvenile probation and child protective services when working specific cases. These social service agencies frequently deal with the same client bases, but, perhaps out of necessity, approach them from different philosophies (i.e., assistance vs. control/oversight). An explanation for this difference of perspective may be the role justice system personnel play (oversight/supervision), though other agencies also play an oversight role (children

¹ It is possible that criminal justice majors need to be parsed out by career choice, since the subgroup of majors going into community-based corrections is likely to hold less punitive attitudes.

and youth services). The primary influencer that remains is organizational culture (see Cochran, Corbett, & Byrne, 1986). As a reaction to decades of increasing caseloads throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, community corrections adopted a more authoritarian stance relative to offender management, and a *laissez-faire* approach to violations, understanding that those who defied the terms of their sanctions would invariably also be involved in committing new offenses that resulted in arrest (MacKenzie, Browning, Skroban, & Smith, 1999).

Higher Education and Training the Next Generation—What Should They Know, and How Should They Learn It?

Organizational learning is often a complicated process in justice agencies. It is common for disconnects to occur between policies made by upper management and the translation of such policies to practice by middle managers and line staff (Kras, Rudes, & Taxman, 2017). A common question in organizational psychology is whether the organization changes the individuals that come into it, or if those who enter the organization change the culture. There is some evidence indicating that the role orientation of line personnel (e.g., “rehabilitative” vs. “community protection”) guides how the officers approach different offender supervision scenarios (Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2015). Establishing a specific organizational culture, then, is likely equal parts management and recruiting, and culture change in corrections is a significant undertaking that often requires a multi-phase approach sustained over an extended period of time (e.g., Byrne, Hummer, & Taxman, 2008; Cochran et al., 1986; Rudes, Portillo, & Taxman, 2021). One way to bring about change is to look to different constituencies to bring into the organization. In the previous section, new employees’ educational and demographic characteristics were discussed as they pertained to a new era of community corrections. A concept such as educational background may be further refined in terms of the “type” of college graduate an organization wishes to pursue. For example, does an agency prefer the “well-rounded” liberal arts graduate who thinks holistically about problems and solutions, or does it desire a graduate well versed in the foundations and policy directives of corrections (Stinchcomb et al., 2006)? Apart from needed competencies or desired organizational culture, there

is no way to label one type of potential employee as “better”; instead each brings a specific set of learned skills and perspectives to the organization. Community corrections line staff are the critical link of the offender management chain who, on a daily basis, make a series of micro-level decisions in uncertain environments that can have significant ramifications for the organization (Kras, Magnuson, Portillo, & Taxman, 2019). If line staff lack confidence in management or the agency culture that develops operational strategies, there is a low probability of those line staff consistently making the most appropriate decision in any given offender management scenario.

Reading the 2006 NIC report, it becomes clear that the supervisory and public safety aspects of community corrections work were prioritized for organizational learning. In Pennsylvania, for example, when discussing the impending retirement of over 40 percent of parole agents and supervisors in the Commonwealth, a director at the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole discussed the agency’s strategy for dealing with the high rate of turnover (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Within that discussion, “supervision” of offenders and size of “caseloads” were mentioned twice, “public safety” once, and “training” was referenced three times (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). No mention was made of staunching the cycle of reoffending, providing services to offenders on caseloads, or lessening the impact of barriers to reentry, among other rehabilitative ideals. This demonstrates a fundamental blind spot in organizational focus that is prevalent nationwide. The overwhelming number of justice-involved adults and juveniles with criminogenic needs such as mental illness, substance abuse, and histories of abuse and neglect require community corrections personnel who are knowledgeable about how to assess these problems and about the impacts of these risk factors on subsequent behavior and rehabilitative strategies (Byrne & Miofsky, 2009).

Managing such client caseloads calls for a wide-ranging knowledge base regarding human development and behavior, as well as an inherent empathy to recognize the source of behaviors. Such officers will likely view those offenders with mental health issues with lower levels of stigma (Tomar, Ghezzi, Brinkley-Rubinstein, Blank Wilson, Van Deirse, Burgin, & Cuddeback, 2017). Further, some evidence has shown that probation officers who employ cognitive

intervention techniques with those on their caseloads have clients with lower rates of reoffending (Bourgon & Gutierrez, 2012; Taxman, Pattavina, Caudy, Byrne, & Durso, 2013).

The General Responsivity Principle of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model (RNR) or the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) strategy developed by the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute (Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012), as examples, can be incorporated into the training regimen for new officers. It is especially helpful if those entering community corrections already possess an understanding of cognitive behavioral interventions, criminogenic needs, and developmental psychology. These are concepts that may or may not be covered in criminal justice curricula. More recently, specific strategies have been developed for the supervision of sex offenders (Newstrom, Miner, Hofer, Hanson, & Robinson, 2019), those with personality disorders (Brown, Beeley, Patel, & Völlm, 2018), and learning disabilities (Townsend, Henry, & Holt, 2020).

Implementation of community corrections practices aimed at reducing rearrest for these specific populations take an agency-wide commitment to evidence-based practices in line with a Risk-Need-Responsivity model (Viglione, Alward, & Sheppard, 2020). The justice field is littered with well-intentioned efforts at strategic changes that are waylaid by actors within the organizational culture resistant to innovation (e.g., Byrne et al., 2008; Cochran et al., 1986; Cohen, 2017). Recognition of the obstacles to organizational innovation from outside actors is critical as well. Training of community corrections personnel must also account for attitudes and perspectives held by justice-involved individuals (e.g., Wright & Gifford, 2017) and the general public. Based on its legacy of systemic bias, many of those enmeshed in the system view the justice process with cynicism and afford it no legitimacy (e.g., Wesley & Miller, 2018). Thus, even strategies designed to benefit those in the system may be viewed skeptically by offenders, and fail to produce desired results. Overcoming these obstacles requires community corrections staff that recognize the complex set of factors that result in the commonly held beliefs of many offenders. An apropos analogy of this idea to current circumstances is the rationale behind the reluctance of some Americans to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, even though evidence demonstrates it to be safe; federal, state, and

local governments have encouraged vaccination; and the consequences for not getting vaccinated are potentially life-threatening² (Sallam, 2021).

Retaining the Best— Incentivizing a Career in Community Corrections and Making the Work Meaningful

It is important to consider that as core correctional institutions change their organizational focus from surveillance and control to support and assistance (see Byrne, Lurigio, & Baird, 1989), the types of individuals that will be attracted to working in the field will likely change as well (e.g., Hepburn, 1989). As discussed previously, examinations of corrections personnel with university degrees have shown some evidence of lower job satisfaction (e.g., Armstrong, Atkin-Plunk, & Wells, 2015; Jurik, Halemba, Musheno, & Boyle, 1987; Robinson, Porporino, & Simourd, 1997). This could be due to community corrections moving away from a rehabilitative ideal and focusing primarily on supervision, monitoring, and sanctioning violations of release. Further, there is the generally accepted claim that community corrections does a better job of preventing recidivism, and those that go into community corrections work may see this as a primary occupational goal. However, Cullen, Lero Jonson, & Mears (2017) contend that this claim is largely speculative, and the available evidence shows recidivism rates remaining fairly stable for decades; thus community corrections staff may experience frustration when they see that their work is not achieving imagined ends. If organizational goals are framed as reducing recidivism or reducing crime overall, line staff may feel as if their efforts are for naught, given the intractability of reoffending.³

Probation and parole agencies are typically

unable to offer financial incentives to employees to raise their job satisfaction levels, as salaries for probation and parole agents are typically higher than for other justice system actors, perhaps due to the higher likelihood that community corrections workers possess college degrees. These workers have a fundamental occupational role to match the right supervision and service to the right individuals at the right time, and endeavor to make a difference to those with whom they work and to society in general (Ziedenberg, 2014). The realities of community corrections work can sour these ideals, make employees feel that what they do has no tangible impact (particularly when the same offenders are under supervision repeatedly), and lead to occupational stress and burnout over a relatively short period of time (e.g., Rhineberger-Dunn & Mack, 2019). Specifically, job stress and employee disillusionment are likely to occur in human service fields that are unable to implement effective strategies and best practices because of ineffective leadership, limited resources, or a negative organizational culture (Toronjo, 2019). According to Stinchcomb et al.'s (2006) report, substantial differences exist between generations of community corrections personnel in terms of how they view their roles, how the justice system should operate, and what components of the job are most attractive and meaningful. Therefore, even if individual organizational cultures are intransigent, turnover in the community corrections workforce will demand a shift in focus if for no other reason than to retain employees. Agencies will need to adapt in order to replace the large number of current personnel who are approaching retirement age, and recognize that the next generation(s) of community corrections workers will view their work through a different lens than their predecessors. For example, Millennials may prioritize flexibility, purpose, and work/life balance over teamwork and job security (Stinchcomb et al., 2006).

Toronjo's (2019) work provides an example of how training new community corrections workers could inadvertently disillusion those entering the field with particular views of community corrections' purpose. Even within an RNR model, the rationale is often presented as crime prevention and recidivism reduction, which automatically creates a nebulous vision for the organization given the inherent difficulties in achieving either goal. Preventing crime is also a goal disconnected from the philosophy behind RNR models themselves (see

Maruna, 2017). Therefore, poorly conceptualized foundations for training are confounding good intentions before they have a chance to get underway. A disjunction between an agency's stated mission and goals and the reality of the work performed within that agency produces an environment in which it is difficult for managers to lead and motivate line staff (Kras et al., 2017).

This situation can potentially lead to a rift forming between supervisors and officers, particularly if older workers in management positions hold different views than those newly entering the organization. Such a disjunction between management and staff in corrections can easily lead to a dysfunctional organizational culture, which in turn has negative consequences for both employees and clients (see Byrne et al., 2008). Poor leadership in corrections, then, is a fundamental impediment to recruiting and retaining employees (McVey & McVey, 2005), particularly those that possess desired core competencies such as analytical and critical thinking skills, the ability to be flexible, and the ability to motivate offenders (Stinchcomb et al., 2006).

The immediate future portends a shortage of community corrections workers in the United States. The "graying" of the workforce, the increased use of community-based sanctioning, and the perception of corrections work as less desirable compared to law enforcement likely mean that agencies will face staffing issues, if they are not already. The problem will be exacerbated in the United States if the current net widening of community supervision continues via growth in private companies' share of the probation market (see Byrne, Kras, & Marmolejo, 2019). The use of the private sector to provide probation services in the United States, though not at the same levels yet, is trending toward those of the United Kingdom, where approximately 70 percent of its probation population was under private-sector management (Byrne et al., 2019), until the recent COVID-19 pandemic forced systemic change (Rapisarda & Byrne, 2020). These potentially dire issues have not received the appropriate scholarly attention, nor is there a holistic plan for addressing them from within the field. This is especially pertinent for recruiting and retaining nonwhite community corrections personnel, where available evidence suggests that these recruits are attracted by the notion that community corrections would take a culturally sensitive, restorative approach to offender management (e.g., Morven & Cunningham, 2019), and not

² In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control recently announced dramatic differences by age group in the rates of adults who have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccination. Further, among younger adults, the least vaccinated are nonwhite. See Diesel, Sterrett, Dasgupta, Kriss, Barry, Vanden Esschert, Whiteman, Cadwell, Weller, Qualters, Harris, Bhatt, Williams, Fox, Meaney Delman, Black, & Barbour (2021).

³ It is important to note that role conflict is found in many occupations and is not necessarily detrimental, particularly in positive organizational cultures. Community corrections can function in a dynamic manner based on contingencies, with officers adopting a more "enforcement-oriented" stance or a "social work" orientation depending on individual circumstances. See Clear & Latessa (1993).

simply be a cog in a larger machine designed to process caseloads with the greatest efficiency or for the lowest dollar amounts.

Conclusion

Criminal justice agencies and programs of higher education need not respond to every potential trend in the discipline—to do so would mean revamping policies and curricula almost in perpetuity. However, the justice system in general, and community corrections specifically, are in the midst of a paradigm shift away from a carceral approach to offending and toward a rehabilitative/restorative perspective that will require personnel to approach their work differently. Regardless of the backgrounds of those coming into the field, they need to be open to an RNR-based approach to working with offenders in the community, and agencies must adapt to incorporate best practices based on empirical findings. Further, community corrections must hear and respond to calls from the public to be part of a more humane and unprejudiced justice system. In order to have the most diverse community corrections workforce, in terms of background characteristics and skill sets, preferred candidates must be convinced to apply. This problem has remained fundamentally unchanged since the publication of NIC's report (Stinchcomb et al., 2006), and is likely even more of an issue at present as criticisms of the justice system increase from all corners. This society-wide critical view of the justice process is likely to have significant ramifications for recruiting and retaining the most suitable applicants for community corrections work.

Within higher education, this shift in perspective may require a difficult self-critique of curricula and educational strategies that have been practiced by criminal justice/criminology programs for decades. For example, most undergraduate programs approach criminological theory in a specific manner (e.g., from a chronological or "school"-based perspective) and detail the subfields of policing, courts, corrections, juvenile justice, etc. from a historical and systems perspective that is often abstracted from the prevalent attitudes of the time periods when the justice process was developing. Put simply, the criminology or criminal justice major has not been established as the most suitable preparation for a career in the justice field (e.g., Huey, Peladeau, & Kalyal, 2018). Criminology and criminal justice programs should look to the positive aspects of majors in other social service/

human service disciplines and amend content in their own coursework to incorporate aspects of university education that best prepare to work with the offending population.

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