

Research Brief

Effects of the Workplace Mentor Program on correctional officers' perceptions of workplace culture

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AIM To examine whether participation in the Workplace Mentor Program pilot had a causal effect on correctional officers' (COs') perceptions of workplace culture and experiences of their jobs.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

COs were asked to complete survey measures at the time of enrolling in the Workplace Mentor Program (n = 167) and again 6 months after enrolling (n = 59).

Due to operational disruptions imposed by COVID-19, program activities continued as intended at one of the pilot correctional centres although were suspended at the remaining two centres. This allowed us to adopt a quasi-experimental research design whereby survey responses among enrolled COs at the active pilot site ('participants') could be compared to responses of enrolled COs at the suspended pilot sites ('non-participants').

Results indicated that participants showed significant increases in their perceptions of managerial support, and decreases in perceived stress associated with organisational job demands, between baseline and follow-up surveys on average. Causal effects of the Workplace Mentor Program were then estimated by comparing the magnitude of change on measures between participants and non-participants. A series of mixed model ANOVAs returned non-significant group by time interaction effects for each of the survey measures, indicating that change in responses over time was not significantly different for participants and non-participants.

We concluded that while the results showed some initial indications that participation in the Workplace Mentor Program could potentially be associated with positive change in COs' perceptions of workplace culture, it was not possible to infer that the observed changes were causally related to the impacts of the program. It is important to acknowledge that both the implementation and evaluation of the pilot was significantly impacted by COVID-19, and future studies would be valuable to further examine the program under normal operational conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional officers work in a high-stress occupational environment that is characterised by a range of unique organisational and operational job demands. Occupational stressors relating to an officer's work environment, interactions with inmates, role responsibilities, resourcing, and relationships with peers and management can have substantial impacts on their psychological wellbeing (e.g., Brough & Williams, 2007). At the same time, organisational factors have significant potential to moderate the impacts of being a correctional officer. In particular, research has consistently indicated that officers who perceive being supported by their supervisors tend to have increased job satisfaction and decreased job stress in addition to better organisational commitment, with lead on effects on work outcomes such as absenteeism and attrition (see Butler et al., 2019, for a review).

Identifying and promoting organisational means of supporting correctional officers' job stress and satisfaction can also be important towards achieving other aims of correctional agencies, such as providing a custodial environment that is conducive to inmates' rehabilitation. Studies have shown that officers who report poorer job stress and satisfaction also endorse less rehabilitative orientations and more punitive attitudes towards inmates (e.g., Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Farkas, 1999). This may be particularly the case for less experienced junior officers who are exposed to conditions of greater occupational stress, such as high security centres (Lerman & Harney, 2019). Explorations of specific precipitants of work stress have also suggested that officers' perceptions of supervisor (Lerman & Harney, 2019) and management (Shannon & Page, 2014) support may influence their attitudes towards offender rehabilitation. More broadly, officers' attitudes and resulting behaviours towards inmates are drivers of prison social climate (Liebling, 2004; 2007), which in turn is a key contextual influence on inmates' motivation for rehabilitative change (e.g., Day et al., 2011; Long et al., 2011).

Corrective Services NSW has recently enacted a number of reforms that aim to deliver a prison environment that enables rehabilitation, in response to the NSW Premier's Priority to reduce reoffending among people leaving prison. One such reform is development and introduction of the Workplace Mentor Program at correctional centres. The program involves teaming up Correctional Officers (COs) with volunteer Senior Correctional Officers (SCOs) at a given centre on an ongoing one-to-one basis. SCOs are specially trained for the program and act in a mentorship role through regular meetings during which they share their knowledge, advice and experience with COs, as well as giving support to COs in completing work training modules and other professional development opportunities. Through this, the Workplace Mentor Program aims to improve workplace culture and foster a supportive work environment, with intended outcomes of promoting learning and development, boosting morale, increasing communication and respect throughout reporting lines, preparing staff for leadership roles, and reducing incidents of workplace bullying.

The Workplace Mentor Program was initially introduced on a pilot basis at three selected correctional centres over 2020. The intended length of the program was a minimum of 6 months, with the option to extend mentoring as long as deemed appropriate. CO participation in the pilot was voluntary for existing staff, whereas the program has since expanded to mandatory participation for newly recruited COs.

AIMS

The aim of this study is to examine whether participation in the Workplace Mentor Program had an impact on job-related experiences and perceptions for COs that are consistent with the intended outcomes of the

program in improving workplace culture. To achieve this, we conducted surveys with participating COs at the time of their initial enrolment in the Workplace Mentor Program, and again after 6 months. We operationalised the intended outcomes of the program as being related to improved perceptions of support from colleagues and senior staff, reduced experience of stress associated with the particular demands of their job, and more positive global experiences of job satisfaction and stress overall.

As previously mentioned, the Workplace Mentor Program was originally planned to be piloted at three correctional centres. However, program activities were suspended following initial enrolments of participant and mentor groups at two of the three centres, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Activities at the third centre continued as intended over the study timeframe. These developments allowed us to adopt a relatively robust quasi-experimental design, where changes in survey responses among enrolled COs at the centre with uninterrupted program activity (referred to for the purposes of the study as ‘participants’) could be compared to changes in responses among enrolled COs at the centres with suspended program activity (referred to as ‘non-participants’) to estimate the causal effects of participation in the Workplace Mentor Program on outcomes.

The findings of this study are intended to inform the evidence base for the Workplace Mentor Program in achieving intended outcomes and support decisions about further stages of implementation subsequent to the initial pilot.

METHODS

This study used a repeated measures quasi experimental design. All COs across the three NSW correctional centres who volunteered to participate in the Workplace Mentor Program between October 2020 and August 2021 received a baseline paper survey to complete prior to their participation in the program. All COs who completed a baseline survey were then invited to participate in a follow-up survey 6 months after baseline, which was administered using the online survey platform Alchemer.

The baseline survey was completed by 167 COs, consisting of 89 participants who had enrolled at the centre with uninterrupted program activity, and 78 non-participants who had enrolled at centres with program activities that were suspended over the following 6 months. A total of 59 COs also completed the online follow-up survey 6 months later (35% response rate) and included 35 program participants and 24 non-participants. Linear interpolation was conducted to account for missing baseline and follow-up data across each of the measures.

Table 1 provides an overview of staff characteristics for the two groups. Program participants had significantly less experience in the CO role than non-participants. There were no significant differences observed in age or the distribution of gender between the groups.

Table 1. Characteristics of Workplace Mentor Program participants and comparison non-participants

Variable	Participants (n=35)		Non-participants (n=24)	
	M(SD)	%	M(SD)	%
Age	41.1(11.2)	-	47.9(9.1)	-
Gender				
Male	-	65.7	-	65.2
Female	-	34.3	-	34.8
Length of Service	5.7(5.0)***	-	6.4(5.5)	-

***p<.001

The self-report measures administered at baseline and follow-up were:

- **Staff support** Three scales developed by Lambert et al. (2017) that measure staff perceptions of co-worker support (6 items, e.g., 'I am able to discuss problems with my co-worker), management support (2 items; e.g., 'For the most part, management at this prison supports its workers) and supervisor support (4 items; e.g., 'Supervisors at this prison are supportive of employees'). Higher scores indicated greater support.
- **Correctional Officer Job Demands (COJD)** A 10-item measure developed by Brough and Williams (2007) to measure staff perceptions about their level of stress with organisational job demands (6 items; e.g., 'understaffing and resource inadequacy') and operational job demands (4 items; 'possibility of violence from offenders'). Higher scores indicated higher levels of job demands.
- **Role stress** A 9-item measure developed by Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) to measure staff perceptions about job-related stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity (e.g., 'I regularly receive conflicting requests at work from two or more people'). Higher scores indicated more role stress.
- **Job stress** A 6-item measure adapted from the original 57-item measure developed by Cullen et al. (1985) through their work with custodial officers. The items measure the extent that staff agree or disagree with statements about general stress (e.g., 'When I'm at work, I often feel tense or uptight'). Higher scores indicated more job stress.
- **Job satisfaction** A 9-item short form of Warr et al.'s (1979) job satisfaction scale that measured staff satisfaction or a range of aspects related to their job (e.g., 'The physical work conditions'; 'Your rate of pay'). Higher scores indicated greater satisfaction.

A two-staged analytical approach was employed in this study. In the first stage we examined average differences in scores on each of the measures to identify the overall change between baseline and follow-up among program participants only. This was followed by an examination of the average differences in scores on each of the measures between program participants and non-participants over time.

A series of paired samples t-tests were conducted to identify whether the average scores reported by program participants on each measure changed significantly over time. The magnitude of the average difference in scores on each measure among program participants was also calculated using Cohen's d. The interpretation of the effect sizes was guided by Cohen (1988) such that effect sizes of .2 were small, between .2 and .5 were moderate and between .5 and .8 were large.

A series of mixed model ANOVAs were then conducted for each measure, to examine whether the average magnitude of change in responses over time differed between program participants and non-participants. Participant status was entered as the between-subjects factor (group) and survey administration timing was entered as the within-subjects factor (time). The effect size for group, time and group x time interactions on each measure were estimated alongside the mixed model ANOVAs using partial eta

squared. The interpretation of partial eta squared statistics was guided by Cohen (1973) whereby effect sizes of .01 were small, between .01 and .06 were moderate and greater than .06 indicated a large magnitude of change. The group x time interaction term was of particular interest because it estimates the causal effect of participating in the Workplace Mentor Program on change in responses over time.

FINDINGS

How did Workplace Mentor Program participants' perceptions of workplace culture change over time?

Table 2 presents the average scores reported by correctional officers who participated in the program for each measure at baseline and follow-up, as well as results from the paired t-tests. The average scores changed in the expected direction between baseline and follow-up for most measures. On average, workplace mentor program participants reported more managerial and supervisor support, fewer organisational and operational job demands, and less role and job stress at follow-up compared to baseline. In comparison, perceptions of co-worker support and job satisfaction saw unexpected declines between baseline and follow-up.

The paired samples t-tests indicated a moderate statistically significant improvement in program participant perceptions of managerial support between baseline and follow-up. There was also a moderate significant reduction in average scores on the operational job demands measure among program participants, over time. As indicated in Table 2, the analyses did not identify any significant difference in average scores on the co-worker support, supervisor support, organisational job demands, role stress, job stress and job satisfaction measures over time.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and average change in scores for each outcome measure among Workplace Mentor Program participants at baseline and follow-up

Measure	Baseline (n=35)	Follow-up (n=35)	Paired differences	
	M(SD)	M(SD)	t	D
Co-worker support	16.02 (4.1)	15.85 (5.2)	-.318	-.05
Managerial support	4.91 (1.5)	5.44 (1.5)	2.193*	.37
Supervisor support	9.68 (2.5)	10.32 (2.9)	1.258	.21
Organisational job demands	6.46 (3.4)	5.46 (4.6)	-1.623	-.27
Operational job demands	5.69 (2.8)	4.44 (3.3)	-2.070*	-.35
Role stress	15.97 (3.3)	15.60 (3.7)	-.626	-.11
Job stress	8.08 (4.5)	7.97 (4.1)	-.832	-.14
Job satisfaction	40.93 (7.1)	39.96 (9.8)	-.182	-.03

Note: *p < .05; ***p < .001

How did changes in perceptions of workplace culture over time differ between participants and non-participants?

Figure 1 shows the average difference in scores on each of the outcome measures over time among program participants and non-participants. It can be seen that in a similar pattern to participants, non-participants showed declines in reported stress associated with organisational and operational job demands, and some increase in perceptions of managerial support, over time. Unlike participants, non-participants also showed increases on both the role and job stress measures, as well as the job

satisfaction measure, between baseline and follow-up surveys. Non-participants showed minimal change in perceptions of supervisor support between the two surveys on average.

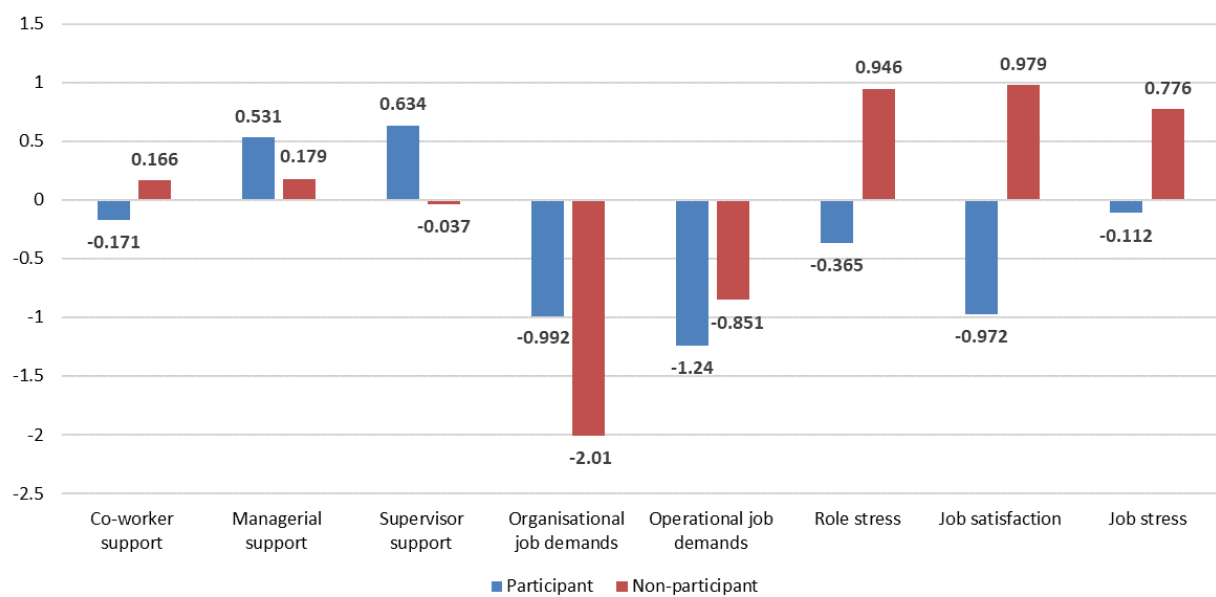


Figure 1. Average difference in scores over time for program participants and non-participants

Table 3 presents the results from the mixed model ANOVAs. The results identified strong statistically significant differences between groups, when averaged over the two survey administration periods. Program participants reported lower job stress, role stress and operational and organisational job demands, compared to non-participants on average. They also reported higher levels of job satisfaction than the non-participants, when averaged over the two administration periods.

Statistically significant main effects of time were also identified through the mixed model ANOVAs, when averaged over the two groups. There were significant reductions in perceptions of both operational and organisational job demands between baseline and follow-up surveys.

Although significant main effects of both group and time were identified from the mixed model ANOVAs, there were no significant interaction effects between group and time on any of the measures in this study. As such, there was no indication that the magnitude of change on measures over time for participants was significantly different to that of non-participants.

Table 3. Mixed ANOVA interaction and main effects on each measure for all Workplace Mentor Program participants and non-participants

Measure	Group		Time		Interaction effect	
	F	η^2p	F	η^2p	F	η^2p
Co-worker support	.537	.009	.000	.000	.138	.002
Managerial support	2.576	.043	3.147	.052	.773	.013
Supervisor support	.864	.015	.617	.011	.780	.013
Organisational job demands	20.275***	.262	6.297**	.131	.990	.017
Operational job demands	13.506***	.192	4.195*	.099	.220	.004
Role stress	10.609***	.157	.404	.007	2.060	.035
Job stress	9.396**	.142	.525	.009	.939	.016
Job satisfaction	12.210***	.176	.000	.000	1.141	.020

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine how participation in the Workplace Mentor Program impacted correctional officers' perceptions of workplace culture and other experiences of their jobs. There were some indications of positive effects of participation, including significant increases in perceptions of managerial support and decreased stress associated with organisational job demands between baseline and follow-up surveys conducted with officers before and 6 months after commencing the program. These results are consistent with the aims and structure of the Workplace Mentor Program, in that both measures address factors relating to management practices and relationships. Change on the organisational job demands measure may also give some insights into how improved engagement with more senior staff could impact officers' experiences of their jobs, through factors such as clearer guidelines for performance and greater sharing or delegation of authority and decision-making around their roles (Brough & Williams, 2007). While improved experience of stressors was implied by changes in the organisational job demands measure, this did not appear to generalise to more global perceptions of job satisfaction and stress in survey results.

While evidence for positive change on survey responses among Workplace Mentor Program participants was promising, it was not possible to directly attribute these changes to the program itself. Mixed model ANOVA analyses found non-significant group by time interaction effects for all survey measures, indicating that patterns of change on measures shown by program participants over time were not significantly different from those of non-participants who enrolled in but did not commence the program at other centres. As such, it is not possible to conclude that the observed changes among participants were casually related to the impact of the Workplace Mentor Program.

One explanation of the results is that notwithstanding the intended design of this study, non-participants received some degree of benefit from enrolling in the Workplace Mentor Program. Stakeholder feedback indicated that officers at the two non-participant sites were able to enrol in the program, and had some initial contact with mentors; however, formal program meetings and activities could not be conducted over subsequent months due to the impacts of COVID-19. In this case, it is possible that enrolled COs at these sites were nonetheless able to carry out informal activities such as discussions with mentor staff. Another possibility is that mere engagement with this program could serve to improve officers' perceptions of being supported by senior staff. Consistent with this, survey results indicated that non-participants experienced positive change on a number of measures, including but not limited to stress associated with organisational job demands (see Figure 1).

A related complicating factor is that pilot implementation of the Workplace Mentor Program is acknowledged to have been systematically disrupted by COVID-19. Whereas formal activities were effectively suspended over the study timeframe due to COVID-19 at non-participant correctional centres, stakeholders have reported that program activities were also less frequent or comprehensive than intended at the participant centre for similar reasons, which may have diluted the effects of participation. More broadly, advent of the virus was associated with major interruptions to staffing and operations across NSW correctional centres, with flow-on effects on implementation of various initiatives. It is possible that effects of participation in the Workplace Mentor Program will become more pronounced, or more readily detected, following full implementation of the program as intended under normal operational conditions.

An additional potential contributing factor to the results relates to selection of locations for the Workplace Mentor Program pilot, and how participants and non-participants were distributed across correctional centres. It is noted that program participants in this study were located at a single Rapid Build correctional

centre, which has a unique operational and staffing model relative to other centres (see Thaler et al., 2022) and has previously been found to have strong performance in terms of staff experiences of their jobs (Howard et al., 2022). In this context, detection of the benefits of participating in the Workplace Mentor Program may have been hampered by officers' elevated existing perceptions of workplace culture and their jobs at baseline. Future evaluation would optimally involve a greater number of participating centres, including sites that are more typical of the jurisdiction-wide contexts, challenges and opportunities that are intended to be addressed by the program.

Some other limitations are noted. The pilot and evaluation were initially intended to be conducted with active participants at all three centres; while suspension of the program at two centres introduced new opportunities for the evaluation's design and analysis, this necessarily reduced contextual variance and sample size for the group of participants. The latter may have had particular influence on some of the established survey measures used in this study which had small numbers of items and were less sensitive to change under conditions of low power, including the managerial support measure.

In sum, the results of this study provided initial indications that participation in the Workplace Mentor Program could potentially be associated with positive changes in correctional officers' perceptions of workplace culture, particularly in relation to managerial support and other unique organisational demands of their jobs. After applying more rigorous quasi-experimental research designs and analyses, however, it was not possible to conclude that the observed changes were attributable to the causal impacts of the program. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the program pilot was introduced during an unprecedented period of Corrective Services NSW operations, with major impacts on both the implementation of the pilot and conduct of the current evaluation. Future studies will be conducted to generate further insights about the Workplace Mentor Program as it continues to be piloted in intended form and under more conducive operational conditions.

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