

Perceptions of the
Texas Department
of Criminal Justice:
Correctional Officers

2012 SURVEY FINDINGS



TEXAS CRIMINAL
JUSTICE COALITION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to express our gratitude to Dee Simpson, Political Director of the Texas Chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), for his commitment to improving conditions for correctional officers and seeking the implementation of smart-on-crime policies, and for partnering with us to survey the AFSCME membership and collect the results.

We also extend our sincerest appreciation to the correctional officers who completed the survey and provided comments for this report. Their perspective is critical to improving practices and policies within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, to the benefit of employees and incarcerated individuals alike.

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The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition identifies and advances real solutions to the problems facing Texas' juvenile and criminal justice systems. We conduct policy research and analysis, form effective partnerships, and educate key stakeholders to promote effective management, accountability, and best practices that increase public safety, save taxpayer dollars, and preserve human and civil rights.

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Message from the Executive Director

The Texas Legislature's Sunset review of the state's criminal justice system is a rare opportunity for system practitioners, advocates, and affected community members to provide input about practices and programs that could be expanded or improved, or about outdated policies that are no longer serving Texas' needs.

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) recognizes the importance of capturing the voice of correctional officers when discussing potential policy or operational shifts that will directly impact them and the men and women they oversee.

As such, we are thrilled to have had the opportunity to partner with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to survey Texas correctional officers about policies and practices within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Their perspective should be at the forefront when considering potential changes in employee retention strategies, staff training availability, and workplace safety.

I must extend my gratitude to the officers who completed this survey for their willingness to provide honest, thoughtful responses. I am also grateful to Dee Simpson, Political Director of the Texas Chapter of AFSCME, for his work in drafting questions and submitting this survey to his membership.

We urge policy-makers, system stakeholders, and members of the public to take our findings into consideration as we work collectively to strengthen Texas' criminal justice system. Together, we can improve the lives of the men and women who work in our correctional facilities, as well as those confined in such facilities, and make great gains in public safety and taxpayer cost savings.



Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ana Yáñez-Correa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ana Yáñez-Correa, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

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Survey Methodology & Analysis

In response to the Sunset Advisory Commission’s review of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) created a 40-question exploratory survey to capture the input of correctional officers working in TDCJ units. This survey contained both closed and open-ended questions.

The AFSCME of Texas distributed the survey in February 2012 through a post on its internal website. Responses were collected over a four week period. Ultimately, 61 correctional officers provided feedback on such issues as employee retention and training, safety, and workplace and incarceration conditions. Their responses were voluntary and confidential.

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) analyzed the survey responses, contained herein. The respondents’ in-depth perspective is critical to our ongoing work to improve criminal justice practices, to the benefit of both correctional facility staff and incarcerated individuals. Findings will be used as supplemental information to support TCJC’s policy recommendations, with an understanding that this feedback is not reflective of the entire population of correctional officers within TDCJ.

Key Findings

- ▶ **A large majority of correctional officers are dissatisfied with their jobs.**
 - 86% of correctional officers surveyed have considered other employment opportunities.
 - 79% do not think they receive sufficient compensation for their job.

- ▶ **Many correctional officers are unsatisfied with the level of training they receive, as well as unsatisfied with how training benefits them in their workplace, and they would like to see improvement in multiple areas.**
 - 58% of correctional officers surveyed do not believe they receive adequate training; a larger majority (66%) does not believe the training they received has specifically prepared them for the challenges of their job.
 - 93% believe that promotions should be based on the amount of training received.
 - 83% would like an extended mentoring or coaching program.
 - 75% are receptive to bilingual education, if TDCJ offered it; 66% believe additional training covering rehabilitation programs would be beneficial.

- ▶ **Most correctional officers find their workplace environment to be racist, and some feel unsafe.**
 - 76% of correctional officers surveyed believe that safety conditions are at stake due to a racist environment within TDCJ.
 - 56% believe their overall work environment to be unsafe; 46% do not think safety concerns are addressed in an adequate manner; 45% do not find current safety policies and procedures to be effective.

- ▶ **A large majority of correctional officers consider the shelter in Texas prisons to be inadequate, though most find that incarcerated individuals have adequate hygiene products.**
 - 73% of correctional officers surveyed do not believe units are equipped with an adequate heating/cooling system.
 - 63% do not believe units are equipped with quality and accessible drinking water.
 - 90% believe that incarcerated individuals are provided with sufficient hygiene products.

- ▶ **Most correctional officers feel that programs for incarcerated individuals should be improved, but that revocation of programming is an effective disciplinary tool.**
 - 79% of correctional officers surveyed believe TDCJ's current programs should be improved.
 - 46% do not think incarcerated individuals have adequate access to rehabilitative and treatment-oriented programs.
 - 66% find revocation of programs to be an effective disciplinary tool.

- ▶ **Many correctional officers find the employee grievance system to be inefficient and imbalanced.**
 - 76% of correctional officers surveyed do not believe the grievance process to be fair and effective.
 - 67% do not think the grievance process is easily accessible.
 - 79% believe retaliation exists because of the grievance process.
 - 74% indicated that the grievance process is not being used as a tool of improvement.

- ▶ **Most correctional officers feel that while gangs are a safety threat, they are adequately managed.**
 - 71% of correctional officers surveyed perceive a presence of threat due to gang activity.
 - 68% believe TDCJ is adequately identifying gang members.
 - 59% find that their input is solicited in regards to gang activity.

Recommendations for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ)

A. Employee Retention and Training

1. Implement evidence-based approaches to employee retention, and offer higher pay to correctional officers.

The survey findings indicate that most correctional officers have considered other employment opportunities and feel they do not receive sufficient compensation for their job. This is in line with statistics showing that some lower-paying prisons in Texas have a 90% turnover rate.¹ Similarly, in 2010, TDCJ had 1,048 unfilled positions.² There is a wealth of information on strategies for employee retention that TDCJ could make use of, including **affordable workshops and trainings** for employees.

Additionally, some of the respondents commented that there are currently low educational requirements for correctional officer positions, requiring no more than a high school diploma.³ Some respondents pointed out that people working in higher-risk positions, such as those who secure administrative segregation units, do not receive additional training or additional compensation.

TDCJ should do the following:

- Offer managerial and leadership trainings for staff in supervisorial positions.
- Implement incentives to recruit employees with a higher level of education.
- Support current employees in obtaining higher education.
- Offer higher pay and training to correctional officers on a scale proportionate to level of risk.
- Explore additional, evidence-based strategies for retaining employees.

2. Identify gaps in current training opportunities and issue areas, and extend the mentorship period for new employees.

The survey findings indicate that current training and mentorship practices are inadequate for many correctional officers; for instance, many would like longer mentorship periods. Mentorship is a **highly recommended tool for training and retaining employees**. According to the United States Office of Personnel Management, strong mentorship and coaching programs can have a positive effect on employee retention.⁴

TDCJ should do the following:

- Conduct a broader survey of correctional officers to identify issue areas that are not covered in current trainings and incorporate findings into trainings for all staff.
- Extend and strengthen the mentorship/coaching period to provide adequate experiential learning for newly hired correctional officers.

“[T]he mentoring process does not work well. New employees being mentored end up as bystanders, rather than participants. They are not ready to do their jobs when assigned to shifts.”

3. Identify topics that will best support employees in their day-to-day work, and implement incentive-based trainings that address these areas.

The survey findings show that many correctional officers have an interest in improving their knowledge base – such as learning more about rehabilitation programs for incarcerated individuals, and taking bilingual education courses – yet TDCJ does not currently provide its employees with these tools.

Additionally, a large majority of correctional officers would like to see an incentive-based training system. Incentives are an easy way to **promote employee retention and overall job satisfaction**, and they can be as simple as recognition of accomplishments.⁵ In fact “frequent recognition of accomplishments” can be the most effective form of non-monetary compensation for many workers.⁶

Furthermore, the survey results show that most correctional officers believe promotions should be based on training levels; a review of best practices agrees with an objective protocol for awarding promotions.⁷

TDCJ should do the following:

- Conduct a broader survey of correctional officers to identify training gaps and implement them.
- Objectively base promotions on trainings and appropriate application of issues learned.
- Train employees in supervisory positions to effectively recognize accomplishments.
- Offer incentives and support to rank-and-file staff.

B. Safety

1. Develop a protocol for dealing with racism within TDCJ.

One of the most alarming findings from the survey is that of racism in the workplace. This could have detrimental, potentially legal, consequences for TDCJ, especially if it is not following Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Laws.⁸ While further study is needed to identify where most correctional officers come into contact with racism, the issue must be addressed as swiftly and thoroughly as possible.

Additionally, the serious nature of this finding raises questions about sexism and other discriminatory practices in the TDCJ workplace, something that was beyond the scope of this survey.

“Discrimination is a big issue on the units. From man to woman, [whether] you are white, African American, or Hispanic, there is some discrimination.”

TDCJ should do the following:

- Consult with an outside team of professionals to conduct a broad, anonymous survey of correctional officers to identify the nature of racism in the workplace.
- Develop an evidence-based protocol for dealing with racism.
- Implement anti-racist trainings and cultural competency workshops.
- Engage in a similar process to identify possible problems with sexism and other discriminatory practices in the workplace.

2. Increase safety precautions within TDCJ, without compromising the rehabilitative nature of its mission.

According to the survey results, about half of TDCJ correctional officers feel unsafe in their jobs or believe safety procedures should be strengthened. Providing a safe working environment for correctional officers means providing **adequate training**. While TDCJ correctional staff receives specialized trainings, most involve *reactive* techniques rather than prevention methods. In 2008-2009, for example, 16 trainings were provided to 3,700 staff members by TDCJ's Correctional Training and Staff Development Department, which focused on defensive techniques, including firearm qualifications, and munitions training.⁹

“I feel I am pushing my luck working in such an unsafe [and] hostile environment.”

“The one thing that seriously disheartened me when I got to my unit was [even though] safety is most important, I [saw] a lot of the equipment is broken or not working.”

In addition to defensive training, corrections staff should be provided ample opportunity to learn evidence-based violence-prevention techniques, such as identification and handling of vulnerable inmates, suicide prevention, and strategies to reduce the risk of assaults.¹⁰ Further, restorative justice, conflict resolution, and mediation techniques have been proven to substantially change patterns of criminogenic and violent behavior, and de-escalate conflicts.¹¹

Some survey respondents commented that TDCJ does not provide proper equipment in working order to officers. Providing officers with the **tools to effectively do their jobs** should be a high priority for TDCJ.

TDCJ should provide trainings covering violence prevention and conflict de-escalation techniques, to support a safer, healthier, work environment.

C. Workplace and Incarceration Conditions

1. Comply with national standards for basic shelter conditions of confinement.

Correctional officers' responses about general conditions of confinement raise a concerning issue, especially in regard to facility temperature and water quality and accessibility. This aligns with recent reports from prisoner units indicating that 93 of TDCJ's prisons do not have air conditioning, especially problematic as summer temperatures reach up to 108 degrees Fahrenheit.¹² Other sources have indicated that several TDCJ sinks were found to be inoperable during Texas' 2010 heat wave.¹³ Also worrisome, some surveyed correctional officers commented that units are extremely cold in the winter.

“At my unit, temps can reach 120-130 degrees in the summertime, and drop below freezing in the winter.”

This practice contradicts the American Bar Association's (ABA) "Criminal Justice Standards on the Treatment of Prisoners,"¹⁴ and the American Correctional Association's (ACA) Standards.¹⁵ Furthermore, the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning

Engineers (ASHRAE) Standards and Guidelines state that a dwelling should not exceed 84 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁶ As a southern state, it is imperative that individuals who are working or being housed inside correctional institutions are safeguarded from potential illnesses associated with over-exposure to extreme weather conditions and dehydration.

TDCJ should meet ABA, ACA, and ASHRAE standards by doing the following:

- **Maintaining a reasonable temperature, not to exceed 84 degrees, within TDCJ facilities.**
- **Installing air conditioning and/or heating units as necessary within facilities.**
- **Ensuring that quality drinking water is readily accessible to all correctional officers and incarcerated individuals.**

2. Improve quality and access to programming for prisoners.

While surveyed correctional officers are split on the issue of whether there is enough access to programs among incarcerated individuals, many officers do not believe the current programs are having a positive effect; they think programs should be improved.

The findings also show that correctional officers feel they can use inmate programs as a revocable privilege for disciplinary purposes. Giving correctional officers more tools to curb negative behavior – especially tools that do not impede inmates’ rehabilitative progress – could lead to a safer and more enjoyable working environment. Studies show that education and rehabilitative programs decrease disciplinary infractions.¹⁷

TDCJ should do the following:

- **Offer additional, higher quality rehabilitative programs to incarcerated individuals, which will improve working conditions for correctional officers.**
- **Prohibit the revocation of programming for disciplinary purposes, where possible.**

3. Strengthen the efficiency and fairness of the employee grievance system.

The survey findings show that correctional officers do not feel the employee grievance process to be adequate, instead finding it to be unfair, ineffective, and not easily accessible.

Furthermore, most correctional officers find that retaliation is a serious issue that many officers face.

“Retaliation is the order of the Agency when a grievance is filed.”

TDCJ should do the following:

- **Create an independent grievance review board, or identify a non-biased third party to review grievances, to add another level of fairness in the grievance process.**
- **Clarify grievance decisions so the process can be used as a legitimate tool for improvement.**
- **Ensure confidentiality for individuals who file grievances to protect them from retaliation.**

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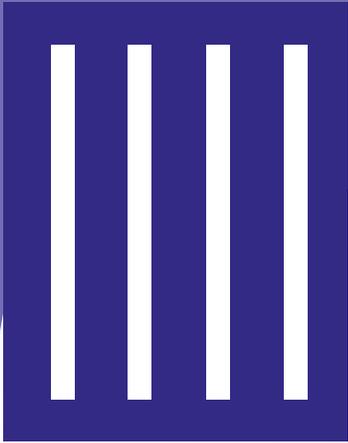
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- ⁵ Karen D. Chung and Nancy J. Peek, “Conditions of Confinement in Texas Prisons,” December 2010, information available upon request.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Jeff Latimer, Craig Dowden, and Danielle Muise, “The Effectiveness of Restorative Justice Practices: A Meta-Analysis,” *The Prison Journal* 85, no. 2 (June 2005): 127-144. Also see Bridges to Life, “Goals, Outcomes, and Evaluation,” http://www.bridgestolife.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=8. This successful Texas restorative justice program has seen an 18.8% recidivism rate compared to TDCJ’s overall recidivism rate of around 25% (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, “Statewide Criminal Justice Recidivism and Revocation Rates: Submitted to the 82nd Texas Legislature Legislative Budget Board Staff,” January 2011, p. 31, http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/PubSafety/CrimJustice/3_Reports/Recidivism_Report_2011.pdf.); participation in the Bridges to Life program is dependent on a prisoner’s good behavior. Also see Morton, Deutsch, Peter T. Coleman, and Eric Colton Marcus, “The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice,” (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 2006). Also see James A. Wall, Jr., John B. Stark, and Rhett L. Standifer, “Mediation: A Current Review and Theory Development,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (June 2001): 370-391.
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- ¹⁰ American Bar Association, “ABA Criminal Justice Standards on the Treatment of Prisoners,” June 2011, p. 45. Part I, Standard 23-3.1(a)(iv) states: “The physical plant of a correctional facility should have appropriate heating and ventilation systems.”

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¹¹American Correctional Association, “2010 Standards Supplement,” (Alexandria, VA: American Correctional Association, January 2010), p. 50. Standard4-4153 (Revised August 2006) states: “Temperatures in indoor living and work areas are appropriate to the summer and winter comfort zones. COMMENT: Temperature should be capable of being mechanically raised or lowered to an acceptable comfort level.”

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