



The Role of Prison Staff and Public Perception: Punishers or Professionals?

UNDERSTANDING THE TENSION BETWEEN PUBLIC
EXPECTATIONS AND CORRECTIONAL PRACTICE
AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MENTAL HEALTH

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Introduction



- What is the role of prison staff?
- Why is there a discrepancy between public opinion and professional duties?
- Why this matters: for justice, safety, staff well-being and mental health

The Legal Role of Prison Staff

- Enforce the sentence imposed by the court
- Ensure safety, order, and lawful detention
- Support rehabilitation and reintegration and uphold inmates' human rights

Public Perception of Prison Staff

- Often viewed as agents of punishment
- Expected to 'make prisoners suffer'
- Influenced by media, politics, and emotion

Why This Discrepancy Exists

1. Emotional reactions to crime
2. Media portrayal of prisons
3. 'Tough on crime' political rhetoric
4. Lack of understanding of justice systems
5. Cultural legacy of retribution
6. Skepticism about rehabilitation

Impact on Prison Staff (Professionally)

- Role conflict & moral distress
- Burnout and mental health issues
- 'Us vs. Them' mindset
- Reduced support for reform and training

Impact on Prison Staff (As Citizens)

- Identity conflict: public servant vs. punisher
- Social stigma and isolation
- Emotional numbing or cynicism
- Desensitization to inmate suffering (lack of empathy)

Consequences for the Prison System

- Harsher prison culture
- Increased violence and recidivism
- Less effective rehabilitation
- Higher staff turnover and absenteeism

What Needs to Change (For Staff)

- More mental health support
- Trauma-informed training
- Reframing the role:
professionalism, not punishment
- Investment in wellness and
development

What Needs to Change (For the Public)

- Education on justice system roles
- Shift focus from retribution to rehabilitation
- Recognize correctional staff as public servants
- Promote evidence-based criminal justice reform

Conclusion



- Prison staff are not meant to punish — **the sentence **is** the punishment**
- Public perception impacts how staff do their job — and how they feel about it
- Real change requires understanding, support, and rethinking justice