

# The Impact of Role Stressors on Job Stress, Job Satisfaction, and Organizational Commitment among Private Prison Staff

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*Work can be stressful. The most common work-related stressors are the role stressors, which include role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness. All have received attention in the correctional job stress literature. The vast majority of this research has examined the impact of these role stressors on job stress and job satisfaction. Little, if any, research has examined the impact of these stressors on correctional staffs' organizational commitment. Moreover, despite a growing body of literature, the influence of role stressors on private prison staff has rarely been examined. In filling this research void, the following study examines the impact of role stressors on job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among staff at a Midwestern private prison. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models showed that all four role stressors had statistically significant effects on job stress. Role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload each had a significant impact on job satisfaction, while role conflict and role ambiguity had significant effects on the organizational commitment of private prison staff. This article concludes with the implications of these findings for correctional research and practice.*

**Key Words: Private prison staff; role stressors; job stress; job satisfaction; organizational commitment**

## Introduction

The 'tough on crime' movement has been a very costly venture, which has been recently realized in the ever-increasing governmental concern over correctional costs. For most states, corrections occupies the largest portion of the government budget. Yet the shrinking economy and decreased federal financial support is forcing states to re-evaluate these allocations. Privatization has always been an option, although past use of private companies has usually focused on medical care, food services, and psychiatric services. Today, though, complete privatization of institutions may be a financially sound alternative, not only providing a cheaper, more efficient facility but providing a tax base for local communities. Before this is considered as a viable option, though, it is important to empirically examine the similarities and differences between public and private institutions on all levels. As the research on various aspects of private prisons expands, one area receiving little attention has been staff. Since corrections relies on staff to meet its mission(s), it is essential to understand the similarities and differences between public and private sector employees. This paper begins to bridge the gap by focusing on the impact of role stressors and its effects on job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

The first modern fully-private prison in the US opened in 1984.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the number of private prisons in the country has grown considerably;<sup>3</sup> in 2002, there were over 250, with a rated capacity of more than 105,000 inmates.<sup>4</sup> This is a huge increase in less than 20 years. With the growth in the number of private prisons, there has also been an increase in the number of articles and books on private prisons. Camp *et al* contend that:

There has been no shortage of materials written on the merits or disadvantages of private prisons with the viewpoints often depending upon the politics of the authors. Much of the written material to date has been written to provide justification for or against the use of private prisons.<sup>5</sup>

The literature has discussed the theoretical, ethical, and legal issues surrounding private prisons<sup>6</sup>, as well as presenting empirical studies examining the cost effectiveness and quality,<sup>7</sup> accountability,<sup>8</sup> recidivism rates,<sup>9</sup> and death rates<sup>10</sup> of private as compared to public prisons. While these are all important areas, staff at private prisons have largely been ignored.

Of the 25,000 individuals employed at private correctional facilities in the US, over 14,000 are employed in the area of custody.<sup>11</sup> Employees are not only the single largest financial expenditure in the typical correctional budget, but they are responsible for the myriad tasks required to keep the facility operating. Staff are the pivotal force in why a private prison succeeds or fails. The few studies that have examined private prison staff have only compared them to their public counterparts. These comparison studies have used survey data to determine what, if any, differences exist,<sup>12</sup> and while comparison studies are important in the apparently never-ending debate for or against private prisons, they do not provide the answer to the questions of whether and how the work environment impacts private prison workers. Thus there is a need to study private prison staff and how the work environment affects them.

Overall, private prison staff have not received the empirical attention they deserve:

A lieutenant with a large urban county sheriff's department described the negative image of jails by stating that law enforcement is the golden child of the criminal justice system, prisons are the stepchild, and jails are the unwanted 'bastard' child who is locked in the attic and ignored.<sup>13</sup>

To expand on this analogy, private prison staff have been abandoned at an orphanage. Some in the field of corrections argue that such staff are merely a subset of correctional staff in general. While this may be true, it certainly has not been empirically demonstrated. In fact, Camp and Gaes found that private prisons had a higher rate of staff separation than did facilities in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, despite similar staff-to-inmate ratios.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the literature suggests that there are major differences between public and private prisons. In many ways, private prisons have more positive benefits, such as more flexibility to change programs and respond quickly to problems, less restraints in rewarding staff for good work, less rigid promotional procedures, and so forth, than are found in many public correctional systems.<sup>15</sup> In other ways, private prisons compare badly with public correctional facilities.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned previously, the literature suggests that private prisons have a much higher turnover rate than public prisons; they generally have lower pay and fewer benefits.<sup>17</sup> These salient differences suggest that job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment may already be lower at private than public prisons. Therefore, it becomes even more critical to study how the work environment affects private prison staff. It is clearly undesirable to create work forces which lead to lower levels of satisfaction and commitment and higher levels of stress among private prison workers, and hence there is a need to examine the work environment and how it affects these employees, despite the assumption that the work environment affects private the same as public prison staff. Empirical evidence is required before any such conclusions can be inferred, and at this time there is too little information on the impact of the work environment on private prison staff for any firm conclusions to be drawn.

Not only do staff attitudes and behaviors have significant effects on private prisons, but work environments there impact the attitudes and behaviors of employees. Job stress, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are three salient areas in which the work environment can affect correctional staff. Work stressors are one dimension of the work environment that should help shape the job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of private prison employees. Role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness of the job are four major types of work stressors which may impact staff. This study examines the effect of these four stressors on job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among workers at a private Midwestern prison.

### **Literature review**

Work stress can be divided into two broad domains: stressors, and reactions to them.<sup>18</sup> Stressors are:

conditions that place excessive/unusual demands on a person and are capable of engendering psychological discomfort (that is, stress, physiological pathology, and/or social disability).<sup>19</sup>

The reactions to work stressors are called job stress. Stress reactions are the emotional, psychological, behavioral, and physiological consequences which result from exposure (especially prolonged exposure) to stressors.<sup>20</sup> The short-term responses to stressors manifest themselves in terms of fatigue, anxiety, and tension, with the long-term responses usually in the form of burnout, depression, substance abuse, and medical problems such as poor health, heart problems, high blood pressure, and even death.<sup>21</sup> Short-term responses are frequently studied. Across a wide array of disciplines and organizations, the determinants of job stress are often explored and studied because of its harmful and detrimental effects on employees.

Role characteristics (or role stress) are viewed as a major stressor for many employees.<sup>22</sup> Role stress is defined as ‘the degree of incongruity or incompatibility of expectations associated with the role [of the employee]’,<sup>23</sup> and results from work roles. The major forms of role stressors found in many private prisons are role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and the dangerousness of the job. Role conflict occurs when behaviors for a given job or position are inconsistent with one another.<sup>24</sup> In other words, role conflict is where ‘compliance with one set of pressures makes compliance with another set difficult, objectionable, or impossible.’<sup>25</sup> Role ambiguity is defined as uncertainty or a lack of information in carrying out the duties and responsibilities of a given position or job.<sup>26</sup> ‘In other words, the job role has not been clearly defined.’<sup>27</sup> Role overload is where a person is required to do too many tasks for his/her job.<sup>28</sup> The dangerousness of the job refers to a worker’s perceptions that his/her job is dangerous and, as a result, he/she feels unsafe on the job.

In the literature, the role stressors of role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness are viewed as a major determinant of job stress.<sup>29</sup> However, no published empirical studies on the impact of the work environment, let alone of role stressors, on private prison staff could be located. Without relevant literature on private prison staff, it was necessary to utilize that on public prisons. Role conflict has been linked to job stress among correctional officers at public prisons.<sup>30</sup> Less research has been done on role ambiguity. One article suggested that role ambiguity leads to job stress among correctional officers.<sup>31</sup> Several studies used a combined measure of role conflict and role ambiguity and found a negative relationship with job stress among public correctional workers.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, among correctional officers at a Southwestern prison neither role conflict nor role ambiguity had a significant effect on job stress.<sup>33</sup> However, in the same study, role overload was associated with job stress.<sup>34</sup> Finally, research has found that the perceived dangerousness of the job, as a result of threats and inmate violence, is a significant cause of stress for many correctional staff.<sup>35</sup>

Hopkins defined job satisfaction as ‘the fulfillment or gratification of certain needs that are associated with one’s work.’<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Locke defined overall job satisfaction as ‘a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences.’<sup>37</sup> Basically, job satisfaction is an affective response by an employee concerning his/her particular job in an organization, and this response results from the individual’s overall comparison of actual outcomes with those that are expected, needed, wanted, desired, or perceived to be fair and just.<sup>38</sup> The determinants of job satisfaction are often studied because job satisfaction is theorized to have significant impact on workers. Higher levels of job satisfaction have been linked with positive work attitudes and behaviors, such as productivity and efficiency,<sup>39</sup> extra role behaviors,<sup>40</sup> and positive employee social responsibility.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, low levels of job satisfaction have been linked to negative work behaviors, intentions, and attitudes, such as burnout, absenteeism, turnover intent, and turnover.<sup>42</sup> As such, private prison administrators should be concerned about job satisfaction because it has significant effects on employees.

Role strain (ie consisting of role ambiguity and role contradictions) has been found to influence the job satisfaction of Arizona public correctional staff,<sup>43</sup> as well as correctional staff at six state prisons in Missouri.<sup>44</sup> Among Southern correctional officers, it was found that role conflict negatively impacted job satisfaction.<sup>45</sup> Cullen *et al* found that the perceived dangerousness of the job was positively correlated with job dissatisfaction among Southern state correctional officers.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Grossi *et al* found no relationship between perceived dangerousness and job satisfaction in their study of Southern correctional officers.<sup>47</sup> No study looking at the impact on role overload among correctional staff could be found.

The core elements of organizational commitment are generally defined as loyalty to the organization, identification with the organization (ie pride in the organization and internalization of its goals), and involvement in the organization (ie personal efforts made for the sake of the organization).<sup>48</sup> It is a bond to the whole organization, and not simply to a job or work group. High levels of organizational commitment have been linked to positive employee attitudes and behaviors, such as receptivity to change and openness to innovation,<sup>49</sup> creativity performance,<sup>50</sup> and extra work effort, creativity, and innovativeness.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, low levels of organizational commitment have been linked to negative employee attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, such as reduced work input, psychological withdrawal, absenteeism, turnover intent, and turnover.<sup>52</sup> Because of its potentially powerful effects on workers and the fact that private prisons are labor-intensive, private prison administrators should be concerned about organizational commitment because it has significant effects on employees.

Much of the research conducted on public correctional staff has focused on either job stress or job satisfaction; very little has been conducted on the potential antecedents of organizational commitment. Although Robinson *et al* found that job stress was negatively correlated with organizational commitment among Canadian governmental correctional staff, they did not examine the impact of role stressors on organizational commitment.<sup>53</sup>

The aim of the current study was to add to the existing literature on private prisons by examining the impact of role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness. It is important to understand how the work environment impacts workers at private correctional facilities. In addition, this study will add to the literature by examining whether role stressors are determinants of organizational commitment. Organizational commitment, even though it has significant effects on many different employee behaviors, intentions, and attitudes, is an area not generally studied in either the private or public prison literature.

## Methods

### *Respondents*

In the Fall of 2002, the entire staff at a private prison in the Midwest were surveyed. The prison was a maximum security facility which housed 450 juvenile inmates adjudicated as adult offenders. A cover letter and the front page of the survey explained that participation was voluntary and that the results would be kept in strict confidence. Approximately 200 staff were given the survey, with 160 usable responses being returned—a rate of 73 per cent. To encourage employees to participate, a raffle was held in which several cash awards, ranging from \$50 to \$100, were provided to staff through a random draw: a total of \$500 was given away. A comparison of the sample with the entire staff population revealed that the former appeared to be representative of the whole workforce,<sup>54</sup> and given also the high response rate, no follow-up survey was administered.

The responding staff represented all the work areas of the prison except upper management and administration, and included correctional officers, counselors, work supervisors, and so forth. In terms of work position, about 62 per cent of the respondents indicated that they were correctional officers, nine per cent custody supervisors, and three per cent unit management staff (ie counselors, case managers, and unit managers); a further four per cent worked in education, three per cent in the medical department, six per cent in the business office, and 13 per cent in other areas. The respondents comprised 59 per cent males and 41 per cent females, and ranged in age from 19 to 49 years; the mean age was 37.77, with a standard deviation of 10.82. Tenure ranged from 0 to 53 months; the reason for this low average is that the prison had been open for less than five years at the time of the survey. The mean tenure was 20.64 months, with a standard deviation of 13.84. About six per cent of the respondents indicated that their highest educational level was a high school diploma or GED; 47 per cent stated that they had some college education but no degree, 24 per cent an associate's degree, 16 per cent a bachelor's degree, and seven per cent a graduate or professional degree. Approximately 79 per cent of the respondents indicated that they were white, 11 per cent that they were black, two per cent that they were Hispanic, three per cent that they were Native American, and four per cent that they were another race. The survey sample was representative of the entire correctional staff population.

### *Variables*

Multiple survey items were used to construct indices for the independent and dependent attitudinal variables (see Appendix). The three outcome (ie dependent) variables were job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Job stress was measured using five items adapted from Crank *et al.*,<sup>55</sup> and had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82;<sup>56</sup> the items were summed to form an index of job stress. Job satisfaction was measured using five items from Brayfield and Rothe,<sup>57</sup> the items being summed to form an index with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92. Finally, organizational commitment was measured using six items from Mowday *et al.*<sup>58</sup> The organizational commitment index formed from the six items had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

The independent variables were role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and the dangerousness of the job. Role conflict was measured using five items, from several sources,<sup>59</sup> and a role conflict index created by summing the five items; the index had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73. Role ambiguity was measured by four items, from three sources;<sup>60</sup> the four items, which had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70, were summed to form an index of role ambiguity. Role overload was measured using three items from Ivancevich and Matteson<sup>61</sup> and from Triplett *et al.*,<sup>62</sup> the three items were summed to form an index of role overload, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.77. Finally, the perceived dangerousness of the job was measured using five items from Cullen *et al.*;<sup>63</sup> an index was created by summing the five items, the index having a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78.

Six demographic characteristics were selected as control variables. Race was measured as a dichotomous variable representing whether the respondent was white (1) or non-white (0). The respondents were classified as 79 per cent white and 21 per cent non-white. Gender was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Age was measured in continuous years. Tenure was measured as the number of months the respondent had worked at the private prison. Education was measured as a dichotomous variable representing whether the respondent had a college degree (1) or not (0); forty-seven per cent had earned some type of degree (ie associate's, bachelor's, master's, or professional) and 53 per cent had not earned a college degree. Position was measured as a dichotomous variable. If the respondent was a non-supervisory correctional officer, he/she was coded as 1, and those who worked in other positions were coded as 0. Sixty-two per cent were coded as correctional officers and 48 per cent as non-custodial staff.

### Results

Descriptive statistics for the measures used in this study are presented in Table 1. There appeared to be significant variation in both the dependent and independent variables.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for measures**

Measure	Description	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Race	0 = Nonwhite, 1 = White	0	1	0.79	0.40
Gender	0 = Female, 1 = Male	0	1	0.59	0.49
Age	Continuous years	19	68	35.77	10.82
Tenure	Months at the prison	0	53	20.64	13.84
Education	0 = No college degree 1 = College degree	0	1	0.47	0.50
Position	0 = Non-custody, 1 = Custody	0	1	0.62	0.49
Role conflict	5-item index, $\alpha = 0.73$	8	25	15.29	3.96
Role ambiguity	4-item index, $\alpha = 0.70$	4	19	9.22	2.86
Role overload	3-item index, $\alpha = 0.77$	3	15	8.44	2.67
Dangerousness	5-item index, $\alpha = 0.78$	6	25	16.01	4.32
Job stress	5-item index, $\alpha = 0.82$	6	25	14.29	4.51
Job satisfaction	5-item index, $\alpha = 0.92$	5	25	18.34	4.67
Organizational commitment	6-item index, $\alpha = 0.88$	10	26	18.14	4.00

Note:  $\alpha$  represents Cronbach's alpha.

Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated, and the results are presented in Table 2. Tenure had a statistically significant positive correlation with job stress: as tenure increased, so did job stress. Tenure was the only demographic variable that had a significant association with job stress. All the role stressors had significant positive correlations with job stress. As role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness increased, so too did job stress. Role overload had the largest correlation, followed closely by role ambiguity, role conflict, and the dangerousness of the job. Tenure had the smallest significant correlation, about half that of dangerousness and one-third that of role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict.

**Table 2. Pearson's correlation matrix for model variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Race	1.00												
2. Gender	.08	1.00											
3. Age	-.05	-.18*	1.00										
4. Tenure	.06	.00	.07	1.00									
5. Education	.08	-.13	.16*	.12	1.00								
6. Position	-.02	.28**	-.53**	-.20**	-.29**	1.00							
7. Role conflict	.04	.08	-.26**	-.53**	-.20**	-.29**	1.00						
8. Role ambiguity	-.03	-.06	-.11	.02	.02	.14	.63**	1.00					
9. Role overload	.01	.07	-.04	.06	.03	.09	.48**	.51**	1.00				
10. Dangerousness	-.14	.20*	-.39**	.09	-.16*	.61**	.44**	.34**	.33**	1.00			
11. Job stress	.04	-.12	-.02	.20*	.06	.07	.53**	.58**	.59**	.39**	1.00		
12. Job satisfaction	.01	.07	.18*	-.07	.15	-.30**	-.57**	-.59**	-.50**	-.42**	-.70**	1.00	
13. Organizational commitment	.00	.05	.17*	-.04	.07	-.24**	-.64**	-.55**	-.40**	-.33**	-.53**	.75**	1.00

\*  $p \leq .05$     \*\*  $p \leq .01$

For job satisfaction, both age and position had statistically significant correlations. As age increased, so too did job satisfaction. Non-supervisory correctional officers generally reported lower job satisfaction than other staff. The other four demographic variables had only non-significant correlations with job satisfaction. All four role stressors had negative correlations with job satisfaction, suggesting that high levels of role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and/or dangerousness lead to job dissatisfaction. Role ambiguity had the largest correlation, followed closely by role conflict and role overload. Dangerousness had the fourth largest correlation, followed by position, which had about half that of role ambiguity and role conflict. Age had the smallest correlation, approximately one-third that of role ambiguity, role conflict, or role overload, and less than half that of dangerousness.

As with job satisfaction, both age and position had significant correlations with organizational commitment. As age increased, so did organizational commitment. Non-supervisory correctional officers on average reported less commitment than did other staff. Race, gender, tenure, and education all had non-significant correlations. Finally, role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and the dangerousness of the job all had significant negative correlations with organizational commitment. Role conflict had the largest correlation, followed by role ambiguity. The role overload correlation was about a third smaller. Dangerousness had the fourth largest correlation, almost half that of role conflict. Position had the fifth largest correlation, more than half that of role conflict or role ambiguity. Finally, age had the smallest correlation.

The role stress indexes and the demographic variables were entered as independent variables into ordinary least squares (OLS) regression equations, with job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment as the dependent variables. OLS regression allows for the effects of a variable to be estimated while controlling for the effects of other independent variables.<sup>64</sup> The results are presented in Table 3. Based on the correlation matrix (ie no correlation between the independent variables was larger than 0.70), the variation inflation factor (VIF) statistic, and the tolerance statistic, there appeared to be no issue with collinearity or multicollinearity.<sup>65</sup>

**Table 3. OLS regression results for the impact of the role stressors on job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of private prison staff (N = 160)**

Variable	Job stress		Job satisfaction		Organizational commitment	
	B	β	B	β	B	β
Race	.82	.07	-.21	-.02	.04	.01
Gender	-1.41	-.16**	1.52	.16**	.83	.10
Age	.04	.09	-.01	-.02	.00	.00
Tenure	.04	.12*	-.03	-.09	-.02	-.06
Education	.18	.02	1.16	.12*	.32	.04
Position	-.75	-.08	-1.36	-.14	-.69	-.08
Role conflict	.23	.20**	-.27	-.23**	-.46	-.45**
Role ambiguity	.34	.22**	-.47	-.28**	-.29	-.21**
Role overload	.53	.32**	-.36	-.21**	-.11	-.08
Dangerousness	.26	.25**	-.09	-.09	.01	.01
R-squared		.55**		.52**		.46**

Note: For description of the variables, see Table 1. \*  $p \leq .05$       \*\*  $p \leq .01$

For the job stress OLS equation, gender, tenure, role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and the dangerousness of the job all had a statistically significant impact on job satisfaction. Female staff generally reported higher levels of job stress than did male staff. As tenure increased, so did job stress, suggesting possible burnout. Role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness all had a positive effect, which means an increase in one of the role stressors is associated with an increase in job stress among these private prison workers. The R-squared for the equation was 0.55; R-squared can be interpreted as the amount of variance explained in the dependent variable by the independent variables.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, four role stressor indexes and the six demographic characteristics explained about 55 per cent of the variance of the job stress among the staff surveyed.

In examining the standardized coefficients (ie the  $\beta$  in Table 3), it is possible to compare the magnitude of the independent variables' effects on the dependent variable. Since the unstandardized coefficients are measured in different units of metric (ie units of measurement, such as years, months, etc), it is not possible to use unstandardized coefficients to compare the size of effects between the different independent variables in the same regression equation. Since standardized coefficients are metric-free (ie represent standardized units), standardized coefficients are valuable in comparing the size (ie magnitude) of the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable.<sup>67</sup> Of the six significant variables, role overload had the greatest effect, followed by dangerousness. Next were role ambiguity and role conflict, with a similar magnitude of effects. Finally, gender and tenure had the least amount of impact on job stress among these private correctional employees.

For the job satisfaction OLS equation, gender, education, role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload all had a statistically significant effect. Male staff, in general, reported higher levels of job satisfaction than female staff. Those workers with a college degree on average reported higher levels of job satisfaction than did those without one. Role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload all had an inverse effect on job satisfaction. Dangerousness did not have a significant impact. The four role stressor indexes and the six demographic variables accounted for 52 per cent of the variance in job satisfaction. Based on the standardized regression coefficients among the five significant variables, role ambiguity had the greatest impact, followed closely by role conflict and role overload. The last two significant variables were gender and education (which only had roughly half the size effect of the three role stressors).

For the organizational commitment OLS regression equation, role conflict and role ambiguity both had a statistically significant impact. Role conflict and role ambiguity both had a negative effect on respondents' organizational commitment. None of the demographic variables had a significant impact on their organizational commitment, nor did role overload or dangerousness. For this model, roughly 46 per cent of the variance in organizational commitment was explained by the four role stressor indexes and six demographic variables. In terms of magnitude of effect, role conflict had the largest effect, followed by role ambiguity with less than half the impact of role conflict.

## **Discussion**

The focus of the study was to see what impact, if any, role stressors had on private prison staff. The results support the conclusion that role stressors are important in shaping the job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of private prison workers. It appears that role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness all cause workers job stress. The findings suggest that private prison employees want clearly defined roles, directions, expectations, and guidance for their jobs, and they do not want to be overloaded in their assigned job tasks. It is also apparent that employees want a safer work environment. Without this, they are much more likely to suffer from job stress. As discussed in the literature section, heightened and prolonged job stress has

only harmful effects for most employees, such as increased absenteeism, increased health problems, decrease in quality of life, decreased organizational activity, and so forth. The above findings among private prison staff are consistent with that found for staff at public facilities.

Role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload all appear to be influential in shaping the job satisfaction of private prison employees. Employees want clear, concise roles that do not overlap, let alone conflict, with one another. If they do not have this, job satisfaction suffers. Additionally, the results support the position that prison employees do not want a job that requires them to do too many tasks in an insufficient amount of time. In fact, it is doubtful if there are any employees who would enjoy such a job over the long haul. The person simply burns out, causing him/her to dread the job. In the end, role stressors, if left unchecked, cause lower job satisfaction, and low job satisfaction is linked to many negative outcomes, such as absenteeism, turnover, burnout, and so forth. Moreover, not only is the employee impacted by low satisfaction, but in the end so too is the private prison. A recent study examined role ambiguity and role conflict at a public prison. The results of this study are similar, indicating that on these variables there is little difference between private and public employees.<sup>68</sup>

It is interesting to note that while dangerousness had a significant impact on job stress, it had none on job satisfaction. Dangerousness probably keeps people on their toes, which in the long run may lead to increased tension. However, this does not necessarily translate to lower job satisfaction. Staff at the private prison realize that working in a maximum security facility can be dangerous, but this does not mean that their job satisfaction is harmed. The staff surveyed probably derive such satisfaction from other factors—in fact, working in a dangerous job may provide them with a sense of pride. More specifically, staff may see themselves as providing security and safety for society. Furthermore, as mentioned in the literature review, a study of public prison staff found that dangerousness had no impact on job satisfaction.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Cullen *et al* found in their study a significant relationship between dangerousness and job satisfaction.<sup>70</sup> Thus the findings in the present study both support and refute the results of studies with public correctional workers. Moreover, there is a negative correlation between position and the dangerousness index. That is, correctional officers were generally lower on the dangerousness measure as compared to non-custodial staff, even though correctional officers are those who have the most contact with inmates. Through job training and the expectations of the job itself, most correctional officers have developed the skills to deal with inmates and feel more secure in their jobs.

Role conflict and role ambiguity had significant effects on organizational commitment, while role overload and dangerousness did not. It makes intuitive sense that role ambiguity and role conflict affect staff organizational commitment. Role conflict and role ambiguity result from a lack of direction and clarity by management, and management represents the organization. It is hard for a person to bond to an organization when he/she is adrift in a difficult job because of not receiving clear directions, or receiving conflicting orders from supervisors. It is not possible to state whether or not these results are consistent with the research on public prison staff, as there has been far too little research on correctional staff organizational commitment, and almost none looking at the impact of stressors on it.

It was a surprise finding that neither role overload nor dangerousness was significant in shaping the organizational commitment of private prison staff. It could be that both are associated with particular jobs and not with the entire prison (ie overall organizational commitment). Hogan *et al* found that dangerousness was non-significant in shaping the organizational commitment of public prison employees, though this difference may be attributed to differences in tenure—the average length of tenure at the private institution was less than two years whereas that at the public institution was almost ten years. Due to the newness of the facility and its employees, the assessment of dangerousness may be higher at the beginning of employment. As employees become ‘seasoned’,

dangerousness may be accepted as part of the job.<sup>71</sup> Again, it is not possible at this time to state whether or not these findings are consistent with the research observations involving the staff of public prisons. More research is certainly needed before any such conclusions can be drawn.

The findings in this study have administrative/practical implications. In order to reduce job stress and improve job satisfaction and organizational commitment at private prisons, administrators should focus on role stressors, and must earnestly work on ensuring that their staff do not suffer from role conflict. Supervisors must not give employees conflicting orders or directions. In particular, work assignment expectations should be the same on all shifts. In addition, there must be communication between the private prison administration and staff to determine what role conflicts are occurring and how they can best be addressed. Administrators will need to ensure that supervisors are aware of role conflict and how to best deal with it. Without proper and consistent guidance, workers can become frustrated, leading to increased job stress and to decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Furthermore, administrators should review rules, regulations, and policies to ensure that there are none that would cause staff conflict. This ties into the concept of formalization. According to Taggart and Mays, formalization is:

the use of well-defined rules and regulations to govern the behavior of individuals so that actions within the organization become standardized.<sup>72</sup>

Most employees want clear rules and policies to guide them in accomplishing their jobs, and they want easy access to this material. Lack of detailed rules and regulations leads staff to perform tasks non-uniformly, and treat inmates inconsistently. This will in all likelihood lead to friction between employees who disagree about the best method for carrying out job tasks or treating inmates. Additionally, inmates may complain that they are not treated consistently, which can lead to increased friction and dissatisfaction among staff.

In order to reduce role ambiguity, administrators need to ensure that staff know what their responsibilities are and what is expected of them, and that the rules and regulations are clear. This may appear to be an easy task in theory, but in practice it may be more difficult. It means taking the time to invest in communication and to ensure that there is meaningful instrumental communication between management and line staff. According to Mueller *et al*, 'instrumental communication is the degree to which information about the job is formally transmitted by the employer to employees'.<sup>73</sup> Specific job tasks and the use of equipment must be explained to employees, which is the job of supervisors. Private prison administrators must not only ensure that supervisors provide meaningful communication, guidance, and explanation to employees, but also explain why it is critical to do so. In a nutshell, instrumental communication is not only providing important information to employees, but also explaining this information to employees and answering their questions so they can effectively do their jobs. This means that employees must provide feedback communication, even if it is negative. They must be able to ask questions and express their concerns without fear of retaliation. It also means having clear, concise, and accurate policies to help staff accomplish their jobs. For the private prison staff studied here, clearly defined expectations, roles, and guidance are highly important. Administrators and managers must constantly be alert to areas that may cause feelings of ambiguity among their staff. This requires taking time and effort to talk with staff about areas that cause them to suffer from role ambiguity.

To deal with role overload, jobs must be designed so that the work load is reasonable and balanced. Moreover, administrators and managers must ensure that jobs throughout the private prison facility carry a similar work load within the same pay grade/job classification. If not, it will cause employees to view the organization as unfair, which is tied to the theory of

organizational justice; the premise of this is that employees want to be treated in a fair and just manner by the employing organization, and if they are not, job satisfaction and organizational commitment suffer.<sup>74</sup> Part of organizational justice is the idea of distributive justice, which is a 'person's appraisal of the fairness of his/her rewards [outcomes] given his/her inputs'.<sup>75</sup> Dealing with role overload, as with role conflict and role ambiguity, requires listening to staff and finding out what causes them to be overloaded. In addition, it means allowing employees to offer possible solutions for reducing role overload.

In addressing the perceived dangerousness of the job, administrators should do three things. First, they should listen to employees about the areas in the prison or in their jobs that make them feel at risk. It could be as simple as putting a light fixture in darkened areas of a housing unit, or putting a mirror in a blind spot on a stairway. It may be a more momentous task, such as providing staff with new safety equipment, eg body alarms with tracking units or protective vests to stop knife thrusts. Second, staff should be provided with in-service training covering two major areas: staff must be made aware that working in private prisons is not as dangerous as most people think; and their training should inculcate skills in how to avoid dangerous situations and confrontations, and how to successfully deal with such situations should they arise. By providing these skills, administrators should provide staff with more confidence in their ability to do their jobs, and this should lead to a reduction in their perception of dangerousness. The training should also provide coping skills for staff to deal with the sense of dangerousness and the resulting stress. Finally, private prison staff must be provided with professional care to deal with their perceptions of dangerousness and the resulting stress. This means having employee counseling in place, and making sure that these sessions and the identities of those who seek such help are held in the strictest confidence.

Implementation of these recommendations may be easier said than done. Nevertheless, serious consideration should be given to the findings from this study. In the long run, a private prison will only benefit from these improvements, in lowered job stress and increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Private prisons do not only positively impact their employees; they can negatively impact them as well. Administrators must be willing to make the changes necessary to decrease the job stress and enhance the job satisfaction and organizational commitment of their employees. At private prisons, with dissatisfied and uncommitted workers, doing nothing does not correct the problem and may make it worse. More specifically, it will set the private prison up for failure, which will harm all those involved, including workers and their families, inmates and their families, and society in general. Furthermore, the financial future of the private correctional agency could be harmed, as the consequences of dissatisfied and uncommitted staff come to light, providing ammunition for the critics of private prisons, and ultimately leading to the loss of contracts.

It should be noted that the results presented in this article are from only one study; there is a need for far more research on private prison staff. Future research should attempt to replicate the findings reported here in other private prisons. Different measures of role stressors should be utilized, as well as examining the effects of additional role stressors (not examined in the current study) on correctional staff. Furthermore, the effects of other work environment areas on the job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of private prison staff must be studied. Both scholars and administrators of private prisons need this type of knowledge. Without such information, it will be difficult to develop more positive work environments for private prison staff. Finally, future research is needed which simultaneously compares and contrasts correctional staff's perceptions and attitudes at both private and public prisons. This would allow for a more meaningful discussion of how the two groups of correctional employees are similar to and different from one another. By so doing, it will be possible not only to explore how different dimensions of the work environment impact private and public correctional employees, but also to see if the

levels of perceptions of the work environment (eg role conflict or dangerousness), job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment differ between the two groups. This information is critical for the on-going debate on the advantages and disadvantages of private prisons. The current study was only able to examine private prison staff and compare the results to previous published studies on public correctional workers.

To conclude, there has been exponential growth in the number of private prisons over the last two decades. While there is a growing body of literature on private prisons, most has focused on the never-ending debate on whether private prisons should exist, as well as on whether they are more effective and efficient than public prisons. While these debates are important, it does not mean that private prison staff should be ignored. Employees are critical elements in a private prison. According to Poole and Pogrebin, 'We should be asking what the organization means to the worker instead of what the worker means to the organization.'<sup>76</sup> Yet this does not appear to be happening in the case of private prison staff. As already mentioned a number of times, no empirical studies on the impact of the work environment on private prison staff have been published. In order to rectify this shortcoming, a study of the impact of role stressors on staff at a Midwestern private prison was done. The results indicate that role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, and dangerousness have significant effects on the job stress, job satisfaction, and/or organizational commitment of private prison staff. It is hoped that this study will spur more research on how the work environment impacts private prison staff. Knowledge of and the ability to understand the antecedents of correctional employee attitudes and behaviors is critical for all parties involved, including private correctional administrators, employees, inmates, academics, and society in general. The scholarly community should not ignore private prison staff: they deserve and require the attention of researchers. These are only the first steps, as more work must to be done before the analogy of the abandoned child can be washed away.

## **Appendix**

The questions used in this study, below, were answered by a five-point Likert-type response scale: 'strongly disagree' (coded 1), 'disagree' (2), 'uncertain' (3), 'agree' (4), and 'strongly agree' (5).

### *Role conflict*

- I regularly receive conflicting requests at work from two or more people.
- When a problem comes up here, people seldom agree on how it should be handled.
- Sometimes I am criticized by one supervisor for doing something ordered by another supervisor.
- I sometimes have to bend a rule or policy to get an assignment done.
- I often receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to get it done.

### *Role ambiguity*

- I clearly know what my work responsibilities are (reverse coded for index).
- The rules that we're supposed to follow seem to be very clear (reverse coded for index).
- I am unclear to whom I report and/or who reports to me.
- I do not always understand what is expected of me at work.

*Role overload*

- I am responsible for an almost unmanageable number of assignments and/or inmates.
- The amount of work required in my job is unreasonable.
- The amount of work I am required to do seems to be increasing all the time.

*Dangerousness of the job*

- Most of the time when I'm at work I don't feel that I have much to worry about (reverse coded for index).
- In my job, a person stands a good chance of getting hurt.
- I work at a dangerous job.
- My job is a lot more dangerous than most other jobs.
- A lot of people I work with have been physically injured on the job.

*Job stress*

- A lot of the time my job makes me very frustrated or angry.
- I am usually under a lot of pressure when I am at work.
- When I'm at work I often feel tense or uptight.
- I am usually calm and at ease when I'm working (reverse coded for index).
- There are a lot of aspects of my job that make me upset.

*Job satisfaction*

- I definitely dislike my job (reverse coded for the index).
- I like my job better than the average worker does.
- Most days I am enthusiastic about my job.
- I find real enjoyment in my job.
- I feel fairly well satisfied with my job.

*Organizational commitment*

- I tell my friends that this is a great organization to work for.
- I feel very little loyalty to this prison (reverse coded for index).
- I find that my values and the prison's values are very similar.
- I am proud to tell people that I work at this prison.
- This prison really inspires the best in me in the way of job performance.
- I really care about the fate of this prison.

**Notes**

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