Psychosocial work environment, interpersonal violence at work and mental health among correctional officers

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to present changes occurring between 2002 and 2004 in the prevalence of psychosocial constraints and interpersonal violence at work among officers working in correctional facilities in Quebec. Results suggest that in the absence of specific organizational intervention aimed at improving a deleterious work situation, exposure to low decision latitude remained similar between 2002 and 2004, while exposure to high psychological demands improved somewhat, for both men and women. In 2000, rates of exposure of correctional officers in Quebec to high psychological demands, low decision latitude and the combination of high psychological demands and low decision latitude (job strain) were significantly higher than those obtained for the entire population of workers in Quebec in contact with the public. Exposure of correctional officers in Quebec to intimidation at work increased substantially between 2002 and 2004, among both men and women. Globally speaking, rates of exposure to intimidation by colleagues and superiors practically doubled between 2000 and 2004. Rates of exposure to intimidation among correctional officers in Quebec were particularly high in 2004 (71% among men 66% among women) compared to rates in another study conducted among federal correctional officers (48%) by Samak.

The present study also showed that in 2004, correctional officers in Quebec were more likely to present signs of psychological distress linked with work when they were exposed to high psychological demands, low decision latitude, job strain and poor social support from superiors and colleagues. Psychological distress was also shown to be greater when reward at work was scarce and when there was an imbalance between effort and reward at work. Finally, in 2004, psychological distress among correctional officers was also associated with intimidation and psychological harassment at work.
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1. Introduction

The work environment at correctional facilities is unlike any other, with the possible exception of the environment existing at psychiatric institutions and other institutions of confinement. Although this environment recently opened its doors to the outside world, it remains poorly understood. In the Province of Quebec, as in the rest of Canada and many other nations, the correctional environment has undergone numerous transformations over the last 30 to 40 years

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(Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Liebling, 2006; Rostaing, 1997). More specifically, the mission of correctional facilities has changed dramatically. While the mission of traditional disciplinary prisons was to protect society from criminals by controlling them through inmate surveillance and confinement techniques, current prison philosophy is geared more towards social reinsertion. Inevitably, these ideological changes and correctional policy reforms have resulted in organizational upheaval (El Faf, 1997).

The role of correctional officers (COs) has also changed significantly (Liebling, 2006; Rostaing, 1997). The dual mission of correctional establishments has made the job of correctional officers more complex. COs must successively or concurrently keep watch over (ensure security), accompany (facilitate the rehabilitation process) and serve (provide services to clientele). Change has also affected the hiring policy of correctional staff. The profile is now different: better educated, for the most part in social sciences, and female (Rostaing, 1997). Likewise, more and more professional, non-CO employees have entered the scene (social workers, psychologists, etc.) (Lhuilier & Aymard, 1997).

At the same time, COs face difficult work conditions, particularly regarding the helping relationship with incarcerated individuals (Kommer, 1993). According to the COs, the increase in clientele and the elimination of many tasks related to social reinsertion, now redirected instead to probation officers, has limited the authority needed to perform their job (Jauvin, Vézina, Dussault, Bourbonnais, & April, 2003). This is compounded by diminished feelings of safety, due largely to the difficulty of adapting work organization to the increasing number of female staff and wide-scale hiring of young COs to replace experienced, retiring COs (Jauvin et al., 2003).

In correctional facilities in the Province of Quebec, this context appears to have had major repercussions on the absenteeism rate, stress in the workplace and the deterioration of social relationships among members of the organization. Among COs in Quebec, the number of work hours lost to employment illness and injury easily exceeds civil service averages (Direction de la santé publique de Montréal-Centre, 2001). More of these workers turn to individual help offered under the aegis of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) than do other civil servants.

Concerned by this widespread malaise, the *Syndicat des agents de la paix en services correctionnels du Québec* (SAPSCQ) joined the Ministry of Public Security in initiating a vast evaluative research intervention in all correctional facilities in Quebec. The purpose was to mitigate adverse psychosocial factors and the incidence of interpersonal violence among organization members and improve the mental health of COs. A steering committee was set up involving representatives of the Ministry of Public Security, prison chief officers, union leaders, correctional officers and researchers.

2. State of knowledge

Although the health benefits of work are well known, various studies have shown that COs consider some work conditions dangerous. In their review of 43 investigations conducted in nine European and American countries, Schaufeli and Peeters (2000) reported a high incidence of work constraints and burnout among correctional officers. In these investigations, work constraints include role ambiguity (Dollard & Winefield, 1994; Triplett, Mullings, & Scarborough, 1996), role conflicts (Dollard & Winefield, 1994; Grossi & Berg, 1991; Triplett et al., 1996; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1986), lack of participation in decision-making (Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986), low decision latitude, low social support at work, work concerns, poor relations with colleagues and inmates, management problems, job pressure (Dollard & Winefield, 1994), quantitative and qualitative role overload, few opportunities for promotion, overtime demands on employees (Triplett et al., 1996), safety concerns (Grossi & Berg, 1991; Grossi, Keil, & Vito, 1996; Triplett et al., 1996; Triplett, Mullings, & Scarborough, 1999) and constantly working with the same inmates (Triplett et al., 1996, 1999). The work schedule, position held and number of years of service were other sources of job stress (Dollard & Winefield, 1994). In 2000, a study among COs in Quebec revealed an excess of adverse psychosocial factors and health problems at work among these workers when compared to a sample of Quebec workers (Bourbonnais, Malenfant, Vézina, Jauvin, & Brisson, 2005).

To study the frequency of psychosocial exposure among COs and their association with psychosocial distress, we elected to use two of the most documented job strain theoretical models. The demand-control-support (DCS) model developed by Karasek and Theorell (1990), and Johnson and Hall (1988) has dominated empirical research on psychosocial work factors since 1980. It assumes that individuals exposed to high job strain, i.e. a combination of high psychological demands (quantity of work, intellectual requirements and time pressure) and low decision latitude (use and development of skills and control over work that implies latitude at work, and participation in decisions), have a greater risk of developing health problems. The model also assumes that social support from colleagues and supervisors modifies the effect of job strain on health. Thus, employees with high job strain and low social support have