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**The Effects of Job Design on Physical  
and Mental Health Among Prison Officers.**

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen increasing public discussion about the occupational health of prison officers in Australia. These people work in what is regarded by many as a difficult profession. The problems faced the penal system and ultimately by prison officers themselves, appear to have increased as a result of developments that have occurred in the past few years. Examples of such changes include:

- i. Overcrowding in prisons which puts a particular strain on prison officers, in terms of increases in job demands and constraints. It is arguable that the recent spate of prisoner unrest and demonstrations, are a result of unsuitable conditions in the penal institutions.
- ii. The media focus on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and recent escapes from prisons have put the spotlight on officer behaviour in ways that are not always favourable.
- iii. The nature of the prison population is changing, prisoners are becoming more aware of their rights and less accepting of officer authority.
- iv. In the state in which the current study was undertaken there have been significant changes to the management practices in prisons in each state of Australia with the introduction of "Unit Management". In general, this trend in management involves multi-skilling, where individual officers are required to become more closely involved with prisoner welfare and occupational rehabilitation, as well as continuing in their traditional roles in the containment of criminals.

Given the nature of the job, and the specific stressors or changes which are imposed from time to time, many questions arise. For example, is it the case that prison officers report more "stress" than the general population? Do prison officers experience more physical health problems than the average person? If so, are the levels of poor physical health related to the perceived stress of the job? And what of job satisfaction? Is this related to specific aspects of the job, such as the work demands and the amount of support (or lack of it) officers receive, or is it mainly related to factors such as the officers' personality? For instance, those of a

more sensitive disposition may not fair well in a prison environment. Can selection methods be refined to exclude those less well suited to the nature of the job?

Many of these questions are addressed directly in the present study. In addition, the study was also concerned with examining the model of stress proposed by Karasek (Karasek and Theorell, 1990) which claims that job strain is influenced by the interaction of three job characteristics: job demands, supports and constraints. We added a fourth variable to the model, that of personality. One aim was to examine the moderating influence of negative affect (something akin to trait anxiety and/or neuroticism) and job characteristics on physical and mental well being. Specifically, it was predicted that job demands and negative affect would combine, interactively, to account for a significant proportion of the variability in measures of mental and physical well-being.

The report contains the results of a survey of 391 prison officers conducted in 1990. In broad terms the data reveal that the prison officers participating in the study were physically and mentally less healthy than what would be expected of a sample taken from the wider community. In addition, there was also a significant sex difference in well-being officers, with female officers fairing significantly better than their male counterparts.

Differences between prisons were also evident. Officers in the medium security prisons had higher levels of job satisfaction and exhibited fewer symptoms of physical ill-health than officers at other prisons. At the same time they perceived their working environment as being more supportive of them and less constraining. This pattern of results is in contradiction of the data from a smaller study reported by Dunne and Morrison (1991) where it was found that officers in a medium/maximum security prison were the least healthy. Given that officer health seems to be related to job perceptions, it is suggested that the better health, observed in the medium security prisons, may reflect a successful transition to unit management

practices. Other prisons have not yet had as much experience with this system.

Officers' perception of job demands as well as work and non-work social supports were found to have a significant impact on work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and organizational commitment), absenteeism rates, mental and physical well-being and health related behaviours (e.g., alcohol consumption). Negative affect was also found to influence these variables, but its influence was most notable when it was found to interact with job demands and non-work supports. The interaction of non-work supports and negative affect consistently predicted measures of mental health (those high in negative affect and low social supports exhibiting the lowest mental health). For physical health, the most consistent predictor was the interaction between job demands and negative affect (those high demands and high negative affect had the lowest levels of physical health).

Several practical and theoretical implications follow from the results of this study. One suggestion is that selection strategies may be usefully employed to reduce overall levels of stress in the officer population. Measures of negative affect may prove to be particularly useful in this regard. This strategy, however, will only be of benefit to those officers employed in the future rather than to those currently employed by the Department of Corrective Services. A second outcome, is that the degree to which work and non-work supports can be manipulated, or increased, will have a positive impact on well being and attitude. As such, this strategy offers a proactive management strategy which will have benefit for current as well as future employees.

It is also clear from the study that additional refinement and standardisation of the instruments which measure job characteristics is needed. The various facets of job demands, supports and constraints need to be investigated more thoroughly to determine their underlying factorial structure. More refined measures will lead to better predictions and, perhaps, more

effective intervention strategies. The absence of generally accepted and standardised measures of job characteristics makes it difficult to compare studies on the absolute levels of adversity and subsequent strain experienced by job incumbents. Until better instruments are developed, it is important that more longitudinal research is undertaken as this would be beneficial in helping to determine the causal influences of job characteristics on changing levels of strain.