

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Correctional officers and the use of force as an organizational behavior

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Funding was provided by the Killam Trusts, Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, and Social Science and Humanities Research Council Canada SSHRC 435-2017-1051. Sincere thanks to Drs. Sandra Bucerius and Kevin Haggerty, as well as to Dr. Jody Miller and three anonymous reviewers, for their invaluable comments on this article. Thanks also to students and staff at both the University of Alberta Centre for Criminological Research and the Cambridge University Prison Research Centre, who provided enormously helpful feedback on early drafts of this article. Finally, sincere thanks to all the participants who shared their stories with me.

Funding information

Killam Trusts; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Grant/Award Number: 435-2017-1051; Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation

Abstract

During the past 30 years, bureaucratic managerialism has reshaped how prison staff maintain order. Policies and graduated disciplinary models have replaced coercive methods, reducing disciplinary use of force by prison staff against incarcerated people. Managerialism, however, disguises deep problems in the interpretation and enforcement of use-of-force policies. Drawing on 131 semistructured interviews with Canadian correctional officers (COs), I show how managers and prison staff interpret and negotiate policies to justify using force to maintain order. Although COs frame policies and management supervision as significant checks on their actions, they also suggest that inconsistencies in policy interpretation and implementation facilitate certain kinds of use-of-force decisions, which I define as “construction” and “outsourcing.” I conclude by discussing the broader organizational implications of these findings.

KEYWORDS

correctional officers, policy, prison management, use of force

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Violence by prison staff against incarcerated people is a feature of prison literature going back to the foundation of the modern penitentiary (Garland, 1990). The last 30 years, however, have seen major shifts in how coercive force is employed. In the 1980s, coercive force was a regular feature of correctional officer (or CO) work (Marquart, 1986a). In contrast, modern managerialist frameworks have reduced the discretionary power COs possess, and bureaucratic restrictions carefully shape how, when, and why officers employ force. Use-of-force models, which place strict limits on what is and is not permissible, ensure that uses of force in prison are legitimate and (legally) justified (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2013; Meško & Hacin, 2020). These models allow administrators to defend the use of force in prison as reasonable, with no connection to historic abuses (Dolovich, 2020).

Bureaucratic frameworks treat violence by prison staff as an aberration and suggest that modern examples of staff brutality have their source in individual corruption or poisonous workplace cultures (Higgins et al., 2022; Rembert et al., 2023; Ross, 2013). Although influential, this perspective blinds us to how force fits into prisons' modern organizational framework and disguises the specific mechanisms COs use to justify coercion. Consequently, even though we know that violence against incarcerated people remains a significant problem, we have little insight into the structures and mechanisms that reproduce these behaviors (Novisky et al., 2022).

I discuss these issues by drawing on interviews with 131 Canadian COs to analyze the following questions: 1) What role does physical coercion play in shaping how correctional officers maintain order and perform their duties? 2) How do bureaucratic structures in prisons interact with sanctioned and unsanctioned use of force by prison staff? In answering these questions, I challenge frameworks that describe coercive force as an individual behavior and demonstrate how force reflects broader organizational characteristics and cultures.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence, use of force, and coercion are complex topics, which are subject to extensive debate (Terrill, 2014). The involuntary nature of incarceration means authors use coercion as both an analytical lens for specific use-of-force incidents (Marquart, 1986a) and a broader critique of incarceration (Wacquant, 2001). Here, I focus on how COs employ force as a means of institutional, disciplinary control, intended to shape behavior. Recognizing the complexity of the discussion, I employ Terrill's (2005) definition of coercion as "acts that threaten or inflict physical harm on citizens, including forms of both verbal and physical force" (p. 115). With reference to this definition, I employ "physical coercion" and "use of force" interchangeably.

Prisons and physical coercion have a closely intertwined history. Violence was a primary means of maintaining control in early penitentiaries, something that remained central to prison operations into the late 20th century (Dolovich, 2020; Rubin & Reiter, 2018). Marquart (1986a, 1986b) described the specific mechanisms of how COs used violence as a means of control, suggesting that incarcerated people who "frequently broke the rules or engaged in serious violations . . . were unofficially controlled by the guards through verbal intimidation and various degrees of physical punitive force" (Marquart, 1986a, p. 350). Officers used a carefully ladder set of coercive measures as disciplinary interventions. COs began with verbal threats, which steadily increased through low-end "tune ups" and "attention getters" to more extreme "ass whippings" and severe beatings (Marquart, 1986a, pp. 351–354). Institutional managers tried to intervene in these actions

but were rarely successful as officer solidarity and insufficient surveillance meant that COs could usually neutralize brutality investigations.

Forty years later, Marquart's (1986a, 1986b) work remains the only account that details the mechanisms around how COs engage with use-of-force decisions (Rembert et al., 2023; see Symkovich, 2019, for a partial exception). Liebling (2000) famously assessed the prison officers of this period as "representing everything that is dangerous and unpalatable about the use of power" (p. 338), and contemporary observers often frame Marquart's account as an outdated, unsavory way of doing prison work, something standing in contrast to modern, bureaucratic institutions run under managerialist principles. As Worley et al. (2022) stated, "[I]t is likely that neither the officer subculture nor prison administration openly embraces violence as a means to control inmates, as in the past" (p. 4). Shifts in how power is organized in the prison have driven this change (Liebling et al., 2011) as managerialist practices now reduce the discretionary power COs like Marquart's participants once wielded (Liebling, 2006). Large bodies of policies script the expected response to every aspect of daily prison life, removing power from front-line COs and centralizing it with bureaucratic figures away from the day-to-day interactions of prison work (Bennett, 2023; Liebling et al., 2011). Discretion is a part of this picture (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021), but by creating a professional, bureaucratic management philosophy that ensures front-line COs follow policy, prison administrators have centralized power and eliminated many unsavory aspects of prison work (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2013).

Managerialism has revolutionized the organizational cultures of North American and European prisons, something we can see in the literature on how COs manage prisons. Research from the 1980s highlights brutal and coercive practices as a routine feature of maintaining order (Kauffman, 1988; Marquart, 1986a; Worley et al., 2022). Such practices are absent in newer literature, which focuses on how prison staff carefully negotiate policy rules and regulations to maintain institutional control (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Part of this gap is likely due to limited official data on use of force (Rembert et al., 2023), but research suggests shifts in how COs do their work play an equally substantial role. Liebling et al. (2011) described modern CO work as peacekeeping, a form of prison management based on institutional legitimacy, communication, and relationship building. Crawley (2004) described power in prisons as "a *negotiated* affair, with prison officers having much less power than is often pretended, and prisoners rather more" (pp. 1–2, emphasis in original). And Ricciardelli (2019), based on research with Canadian COs, detailed how officers carefully tailor their actions to fit management expectations even when they resent such intrusions.

Even negative descriptions of CO culture and use of force highlight the influence of managerialism. Griffin (2002), after conducting research with Arizona jail officers, suggested that supervisory quality plays a role in shaping officer use-of-force decisions (see also Cook & Lane, 2013; Turney & Conner, 2019). More recently, Higgins et al. (2022) suggested that Kentucky COs engage in danger-based othering to create negative portraits of incarcerated people. Their participants make threats of violence against incarcerated people using dangerousness to maintain a "warped badge of honor" (pp. 2–3). Although lurid, Higgins et al. concluded that such narratives are at least partially cultural performance as officers describe management controls as restricting their ability to carry out threats. The authors concluded that CO cultures are a major cause of official mistreatment (see also Bharara et al., 2014), framing such cultures as counter to the broader managerial ethos of the prison system.

The findings from this literature show how managerialism has reshaped the strategies COs use to keep order in prisons. Research on order maintenance rarely discusses coercion, instead focusing on policy-approved "soft power" measures (Crewe, 2011) COs employ, even when making

discretionary decisions (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Research on CO use of force further highlights how dramatically this topic has shifted. In contrast to the normalized and tactical role of violence in Marquart's (1986a, 1986b) work, modern research primarily discusses CO use of force as brutal, corrupt, and criminal, even when it is common (Novisky et al., 2022; Rembert et al., 2023; Worley et al., 2022). Therefore, most observers now describe CO violence as emerging from individual characteristics such as "bad apple" officers, poisonous work cultures, and corruption (Carter, 2020; Higgins et al., 2022).

Framing CO use of force as an individual decision, one that actively violates the managerialist ethos of modern prisons, blinds us to two crucial points. First, excessive force against incarcerated people remains a common feature of prisons, so much so that recent work has described it as "an inevitable feature" of incarceration (Rembert et al., 2023). Describing these actions as deviant is accurate (Novisky et al., 2022), but it limits the scope of our analysis, and leaves us unable to recognize nuanced mechanisms officers use to engage with use-of-force decisions. In consequence, Marquart's (1986a) insightful but outdated research remains our only portrait of how COs justify problematic uses of force in their daily practice, something that complicates efforts to interrupt and prevent the mistreatment of incarcerated people (Rembert et al., 2023; Worley et al., 2022). Second, by framing use of force as only the responsibility of individual COs, prison administrators escape scrutiny about how organizational decisions shape coercion. Although we understand that structural features of prison impact use-of-force decisions (Novisky et al., 2022), the specifics of exactly what "structural features" mean are fuzzy, limiting our insights into how they shape use-of-force decisions. In consequence, we possess no cohesive picture of how force fits into the broader organizational framework of prison (Wooldredge, 2020).

3 | METHODOLOGY

I draw on 131 CO interviews conducted with the University of Alberta Prisons Project, a qualitative research study conducted in Western Canadian provincial prisons.¹ Provincial prisons consist of remand and sentenced institutions and house the largest proportion of incarcerated people in Canada (Malakieh, 2020). Sentenced institutions hold adults serving less than 2 years in custody. Remand institutions house people awaiting trial, ranging from individuals accused of nuisance offences to individuals accused of murder and terrorism.

Participants worked at four different institutions. Rocky View Remand Center (RVRC)² held approximately 1,700 remanded men and women, whereas Crestwood Remand Institution (CRI) held ~800. Silverside Correctional Centre (SCC) held approximately 500 men and women, an estimated two thirds of whom were remanded. Finally, Harbor Bay Correctional Centre (HBCC) held ~350 sentenced men. These institutions are representative of Western Canadian institutions in terms of size, population, and programming. Fifty-five participants worked at RVRC and CRI, and the remaining 76 worked at SCC and HBCC. This sample represented approximately 5 percent of officers at the remand centers and approximately 20 percent of officers at the sentenced prisons.³ Ten officers were BIPOC, 21 were women, and the remainder were White men, a breakdown that approximates the demographic profile of COs working in these institutions. Service time ranged

¹ Research Ethics Board approvals Pro00061614 and Pro00062785.

² All names of institutions and participants are randomly generated pseudonyms.

³ We did not have access to prison records, meaning these proportions are estimates.

from 40 years to less than 1 year and averaged 10 years. The sentenced institutions had more long-serving officers, whereas the remand centers experienced high levels of staff turnover and had more young officers. Eight participants were managers, and the remainder were line staff.

I conducted these interviews as part of a larger research team, consisting of two principal investigators and between four and six research assistants (see Bucierius et al., 2023; Schultz et al., 2021). Our research agreement granted us access to each institution for 2 to 4 weeks. We recruited officers in several different ways. First, administrators sent mass e-mails to every CO, inviting all staff to participate. Second, we made in-person announcements at preshift “muster” meetings, where we again invited all staff to participate and handed out sign-up sheets. Many COs were wary, and these methods had limited success. Our most successful recruitment strategy came through a version of chain referral or “snowball” sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). After several days of getting to know us, officers became more willing to speak to us and often agreed to participate when we asked them directly or when another officer vouched for us.

Most interviews took place inside the prison in empty offices or on unit control panels. Others took place in nearby coffee shops. We conducted most interviews one on one, but 16 interviews at unit panels involved between two and five officers. These interviews, labeled “group interviews,” represent 37 of the 131 total participants. As Higgins et al. (2022) showed, the presence of others did not seem to prevent COs from reflecting on sensitive topics. Rather, some of these interviews provided deep insight into use of force, supporting Kvale’s suggestion: “In the case of sensitive taboo topics, the group interaction may facilitate expression of viewpoints usually not accessible” (2007, p. 72). Interviews averaged approximately 50 minutes, were digitally recorded, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

We used a generalized prompt guide to ensure consistency between interviews. Questions included “Tell us a little bit about your job responsibilities and work history in the correctional system” and “What are best practices for prison management?” Interviews were wide ranging: Although each CO answered the original prompts, officers also discussed topics relating to their personal experience, expertise, and interest (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because officers’ perspectives shaped the interviews, we collected data on subjects we had not originally anticipated (see also Haggerty & Bucierius, 2021). How to effectively maintain control of the prison was a consistent theme that emerged from these discussions (Rubin & Reiter, 2018), and COs often framed use of force as a key tactic, leading to the themes presented here.

My role within the team was slightly different than that of my colleagues as I worked as a CO at SCC for 5 years before entering graduate school and knew officers at each institution. My lived insight had limitations as I could not rely on naiveté when asking questions, something qualitative researchers have described as a methodological strength (Bucierius, 2013). But my connections allowed me to build rapport with officers when discussing sensitive topics such as use of force and helped me recruit managers, a notoriously risk-adverse group (Rembert et al., 2023). Given my positionality, I interviewed 110 of the 131 participants. Other team members interviewed the remaining 21 COs.

My status also allowed me to interact with officers in back-stage settings (Goffman, 1959), such as in offices and lunchrooms. It also allowed me to conduct semi-ethnographic “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) in nonprison settings as COs invited me to play ice hockey and attend events such as weekend brunches and Christmas parties.⁴ As is common in ethnographic research (Bucierius, 2013, 2014), I introduced myself as a researcher when I first entered these spaces and explained I was conducting long-term participant observation. Officers who knew me were often eager to

⁴ I attended informal events at HBCC, RVRC, and SCC but could not do so at CRI due to scheduling constraints.

chat, whereas COs who did not know me took the opportunity to question me about the broader research project and sometimes signed up for formal interviews after speaking to me. In these spaces, officers casually discussed use-of-force incidents, analyzing colleagues' decisions, and informally assessing whether they were appropriate ("smart") or inappropriate ("stupid"). These conversations were not always drawn from representative groups of officers but provided detailed insight into broader cultural mores around force. When ethically appropriate, I created short voice and written memos of conversations and used these cues to recreate discussions in fieldnotes after leaving the setting. These fieldnotes, which cumulatively measure more than 190 single-spaced pages, provided secondary participant observation data I use to triangulate interview themes (Delamont, 2004).

Given my positionality, the study principal investigators (PIs) and I agreed that a co-developed coding scheme was crucial to help establish analytical validity. I therefore worked with the PIs and another team member to code a set of six randomly chosen interview transcripts. Drawing on grounded theory principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we individually read each interview and identified major themes emerging out of the data (Charmaz, 2014). We compared our results, adjusting our definitions to fit competing readings of the data. We then tested the adjusted scheme against randomly chosen interview transcripts and tweaked definitions until we consistently achieved between 85 and 90 percent coder overlap. Through this process, we established interrater consistency and reliability. We then coded each transcript line by line using NVivo 12 software, resulting in codes on "Violence by COs against incarcerated people" ($n = 68$, with 241 references), "Managing units by unofficial rules" ($n = 85$, with 387 references), and "Managing units with cleaners"⁵ ($n = 49$, with 110 references). As is common in qualitative research, the quotes used are representative of larger themes.

4 | FINDINGS

COs suggested that institutional culture impacted how they perceived use of force. Twenty-three officers had worked at more than one institution and detailed specific differences between the institutional cultures. They described the remand centers as volatile and unstable and suggested officers there had a harsh and punitive attitude toward incarcerated people, even though they were awaiting trial and were therefore legally innocent. In contrast, COs at SCC and HBCC described a relaxed and casual approach, although SCC also held several hundred remanded individuals. Remand staff highlighted the instability and volatility of their institutions as evidence that they did "real" prison work, critiquing the "soft" approaches they saw at SCC and HBCC. In turn, COs at SCC and HBCC criticized remand officers' "hard-ass" approaches as unnecessary, pointing out the success of peacekeeping measures they employed (Liebling et al., 2011). These differences impacted the occupational cultures around use of force in noticeable ways. Remand COs were involved in fights more frequently and told me they rarely had time to build relationships with people on their units. They also described using force as a routine and expected part of their job, something that reflects research with U.S. jail COs (Cook & Lane, 2013; Griffin, 2002; Turney & Conner, 2019). In contrast, officers from the sentenced prisons suggested they usually had time to build relationships with incarcerated individuals, and the cultures of these centers meant that COs defaulted to discretionary peacekeeping options before using force (Ibsen, 2013; Liebling et al.,

⁵ An argot term for an influential incarcerated person.

2011). The cultural differences between these spaces were notable and shaped day-to-day, use-of-force decisions (Cook & Lane, 2013; Higgins et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, HBCC and SCC had far fewer use-of-force incidents overall.

Crucially however, the differences between remand and sentenced institutions evaporated when officers discussed how they used force as a disciplinary measure, as opposed to describing random or unavoidable incidents. COs across the data employed culture in similar ways (Higgins et al., 2022), and when they discussed how force helped them maintain institutional control, officers in each prison described using force thoughtfully and intentionally, with specific goals in mind. Officers from remand centers described force as the most useful tool they possessed to maintain order, whereas COs from sentenced prisons suggested that coercive forms of “hard power” silently underpinned the success of “soft power” and peacekeeping options in their institutions (Crewe, 2011). Whether an incarcerated individual was awaiting trial and legally considered innocent, or sentenced and legally considered guilty, never entered these discussions. Rather, officers leaned on broader cultures of control (Rubin & Reiter, 2018) to justify force as a disciplinary measure. COs in remand centers used these tactics more frequently, but officers described disciplinary force as an organizational behavior functioning in similar ways in each prison.

4.1 | Bureaucratic Responsibilization

COs described control and order maintenance as the *raison d'être* of their work (Rubin & Reiter, 2018; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022; Schultz et al., 2021). Importantly, when officers discussed the specific measures they used to maintain order, they started by listing “soft power” control measures such as active listening, discretion, and managing minor privileges (Crewe, 2011). In combination, these tactics were the most common intervention officers employed, reflecting a broad range of literature on order maintenance (Ibsen, 2013; Liebling et al., 2011; Meško & Hacin, 2020). Haggerty and Bucerius's (2021) article, drawn from the same data, details these approaches.

Prison administrators incentivized such measures by ensuring COs followed regulations and took the institutions' rehabilitative goals seriously. Shane (30-years' employment, HBCC), a high-level manager, described the thought process motivating management actions:

The traditional role of the correctional officer is obsolete really. And it's no longer appropriate for officers in my view to take the position that they're just guards ... twenty-first century corrections demands a different profile of officer than previously. And that's because of the nature of the business, the expectations of the business, the profile of the inmates ... It's everything to this type of environment.

Shane discussed techniques he used to speed the evolution of officer attitudes toward “twenty-first century corrections.” COs were unionized, meaning that administrators could not unilaterally discipline staff, but managers effectively used a carrot-and-stick approach to promotions and opportunities, rewarding staff who fell in line with the organizational vision and subtly undermining union messages. Technology played a role in this, as Dan, a high-level manager at SCC, described:

I do video audits here as well, quarterly, where I review eight hours of video from a living unit and make sure we're abiding by policy and procedures. Rounds, searches, inspections, movements, all that stuff ... We are trying to educate staff through video

and coaching with their own shift managers. Every time there is a [fight] or use of restraints, I review it. . . . Video is here. If you use it properly, it'll be your best friend. If you don't use it properly, it could very well be the nail in your coffin when something goes to court.

Managers carefully supervised CO actions, especially when it came to use of force. Dan describes an educational process designed to change officer behavior through surveillance. This process was also not benign as policy permitted no tolerance for misconduct. As Greg (CRI, 4-years' service) told me, "Managers have called police on officers that work here because of an incident that they have done . . . that kind of thing is running through our minds all the time" (Group interview). Supporting this assertion, Dan went on to tell me that he frequently testified against COs in court cases.

Officers knew they faced disciplinary sanctions for breaching use-of-force guidelines and carefully scripted their actions to fit inside policy frameworks (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). Elijah, a 15-year veteran who worked in the prison disciplinary system at HBCC, told me "Policy is really clear. They expect you to use a progressive discipline model. You start with warnings, violations, and then charges" (Group interview). Officers outlined the intricacies of discretion and negotiating policy expectations (Haggerty & Bucierius, 2021) but described policy as the most influential factor shaping their routines. Zach, who had worked 17 years at HBCC, described CO work as "a policy and procedures job. Everything is supposed to be black and white. If this, policy dictates that." Within this framework, officers described themselves as having limited discretion when it came to maintaining order: "We have less and less options as to how we can approach and deal with it [disorder]. There's a lot more oversight over us. . . . it feels like we can be penalized a lot more. It feels like we're being very much managed a lot more than back in the day" (Charles, HBCC, 3-years' service, group interview).

Officers suggested that management scrutiny was especially intense when it came to CO use-of-force decisions:

Clint (RVRC, 3 years' employment): That's a *VERY* slippery slope. You gotta be *very, very* careful. . . . I certainly wouldn't slap an inmate or punch an inmate unprovoked. Because I'll lose my job and be [criminally] charged. Assault—yeah. It's not worth it. They teach that little portion of legal [in corrections training] for a reason (emphasis in original).

As Clint suggests, managers carefully scrutinized use-of-force incidents, something that shifted CO actions in productive ways. Although discretion served as an important source of flexibility in some areas (Haggerty & Bucierius, 2021), officers repeatedly stated that neither union protections nor managerially permitted discretion extended to use of force. Greg provided an example of how oversight had changed his thinking about use of force: "It's like, 'Maybe I shouldn't get into a fight right now, maybe we should deal with this differently,' which is how most of us think."

Greg and Clint described management supervision as a productive deterrent when it came to using force. COs, however, also identified fundamental inconsistencies in how management interpreted and enforced policies, something that diminished the perceived legitimacy of the broader managerial project (Liebling et al., 2011; Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2022). Clint hints at this with his comments about why administrators taught "that little portion of legal" in corrections training. Heather (CRI, 25 years of employment) worked on a maximum-security

unit with 100 incarcerated men housed in half that many cells. Placement staff labeled each individual as a “cell sharing risk,” meaning that management expected officers to assign everyone a single cell. Facing a mathematical impossibility, officers consequently had no choice except to sign off on “doubling up” individuals, meaning they assumed liability for any subsequent incident:

Heather: It’s the government way of saying if these two guys are put together and there happens to be a disagreement and one of them beats the crap out of each other and worst case scenario kills the other guy, they come back to us and they go “It said right here that there was a cell sharing risk between the two of them, why did you put them together?” ... they’re pretty much forcing us to say yes, just to get a room. You don’t have a choice.

Interviewer: You don’t have a choice, the actual design of the institution forces you to do it, but—

Heather: You are completely liable because you’re the person who said yes.

Here, Heather describes how officers perceived institutional rules. In principle, policies are framed as organizational aspirations, an impartial and legitimate form of regulation that reinforces best practices and reduces malfeasance (Campeau, 2015). In practice, COs regularly experienced a loose coupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) between organizational expectations and day-to-day practice, which left officers liable for broader failings of the institution.

The impact of loose coupling was exaggerated by situations where managers quietly encouraged officers not to follow institutional policies:

Craig (SCC): If you’re following procedures and policy and stuff like that, you’ll get a talking to from a manager about how you’re being too strict on a unit and how you’re causing too many problems. Or you’ll get transferred to another unit. ... They divert the problem by sending you somewhere else if you’re unwilling to change.

Managers informally attempted to structure officer discretion by instructing COs to be flexible in terms of how they enforced policies. The goal of such actions was to smooth institutional operations (Haggerty & Bucierius, 2021), but COs were still liable if something went wrong. Recognizing his liability, Craig told me he had pushed back against discretionary expectations and had consequently lost desirable work placements and promotional opportunities.

The inconsistencies officers described led them to interpret policy frameworks as forms of legal responsibilization designed to reduce institutional liability by shifting it onto individual COs (Campeau, 2018; Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). Martin (HBCC, 10 years’ service) suggested that managers only took prison safety regulations seriously when they permitted staff discipline: “[Managers are] showing time after time that they aren’t concerned about staff safety unless we’re doing something wrong that they can break us on.” Matt (RVRC, 5-year veteran), agreed, stating that, “It’s frustrating from our side of things, because if something goes wrong, the easiest thing for [management] to do is just say, ‘Why weren’t the officers following the job?’” Specific instances of perceived mendacity reinforced such themes. Stephanie (SCC, 4 years’ employment) described an incident where police charged a CO after an ambiguous confrontation in an incarcerated man’s cell. The prison director testified against the CO in the

subsequent trial, undermining evidence that officers like Stephanie believed exonerated the CO in question:

Stephanie: [The prison director] threw him under the bus ... right in court, the [incarcerated man] said that he was roughed up in the cell by the response team, on the way to medical, not by the officer. ... He [the CO] is getting crucified by management for being attacked.

Actions like Stephanie, Martin, and Matt describe were part of a larger ontology that shaped how officers viewed policy. COs described discretion as expected, encouraged, and (re)enforced by managers—until something went wrong, where formal disciplinary proceedings suddenly imposed a rigid interpretation of policy compliance. Ostensible duplicity like what Stephanie describes here strengthened this dynamic, leading COs to believe that managers would lie to protect the institution. As Jared (CRI, 3 years of employment) put it, “Certain managers are out to screw you. ... I’m just wary about what I do.”

This ontology created contradictions between organizational expectations and day-to-day policy interpretation. Officers described policies as general guidelines rather than as firm rules at best (Haggerty & Bucierius, 2021) and as punitive tools of responsabilization at worst. Elisa, a 9-year employee at HBCC, was forthright about how she experienced this gap: “Policy becomes a guideline. ... It’s really odd cause you’re like ‘Okay, if I do this, somehow I need to be able to justify what I’m doing, but I know that if this goes sideways, I’m getting shit.’” In this dynamic, the broader managerial project lost legitimacy in the eyes of officers (Liebling et al., 2011; Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2022), reducing the efficacy of policy restrictions as brakes on officer actions.

4.2 | Coercive Control in a Managerialist Framework

The loose coupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) between official rules and unofficial expectations strongly influenced how COs answered questions around maintaining institutional control. COs had little respect for official disciplinary measures, which they viewed as another meaningless policy that did little to help control disruptive behavior. Noah (HBCC, 8 years’ service) provided a common narrative when he excoriated the independent adjudication system that dispensed disciplinary measures to incarcerated people: “Personally, I think it’s useless. I mean, in my professional opinion, the internal disciplinary process that we have with the adjudicators is useless. We call it kangaroo court. So do the inmates. They’re not consistent.” Clint agreed, stating, “I only ever charge an inmate if a manager tells me I’m charging him. ... I know the charges don’t stick. There’s loopholes left, right, and center.” COs perceived management-approved disciplinary measures such as institutional charges, lockups, and removal of privileges as fatally flawed. Ryan (RVRC, 6 years of experience), who worked on a mental health segregation unit, explained it this way: “We use charges, but they don’t care. ... I always go, the ‘I’m your friend’ route, and then I try and ‘dad’ them to death, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll go from there. I’m your friend, I’m going to dad you, and then we’re going to fight. Those are the options I have. That’s all I got” (Group interview).

Facing issues like Ryan describes, COs described official disciplinary models as ineffective—especially when they compared such approaches with “old-school” disciplinary measures:

Jason (RVRC, 15 year veteran): Y'know, there's something—old school corrections too. There's something to be said about that. Some of these guys need a fucking beating! Some of them don't learn, some of them do, y'know?

Sheldon (RVRC, 4 years' experience): Well, it's [old school corrections] still around. It's just hiding in the shadows. Never really went away. Every once in a while, it'll come out (Group interview).

“Old-school” beatings like Jason describes were illegal and explicitly banned by prison regulations. Primed by inconsistent policy enforcement and the perceived failure of official disciplinary measures, however, officers viewed these rules as guidelines designed to shift liability to staff rather than as prohibitions. This fine difference had discernible consequences. Believing themselves to be guilty in the eyes of the institution no matter what happened, officers expressed few compunctions about using force as a means of control. As Sheldon describes, this encouraged the continued use of “old-school” methods, albeit “in the shadows” of the institution.

Primed by organizational cultures around policy interpretation and enforcement (Campeau, 2018), officers told me that *managerialist approaches changed how and where such “old school” methods were employed rather than eliminating them*. Tim, who had worked for 5 years on the most volatile units at RVRC and SCC, fleshed out this contention, justifying coercive force as a disciplinary method and locating it within the nexus of policy interpretation:

Tim: Sometimes, you get a guy that's so low functioning ... some guys just need, they have trouble understanding, so they need to get sorted out. And other guys ... they won't stop until they get that. They respect force. So, once they get tooled or beaten by somebody else, they understand that. By us reacting less and less, the inmates know this. And they're feeling safer and safer, and they're getting bolder and bolder. And you're seeing more staff assaults. And they know we're limited in our retaliation—what we can do as professionals. We're losing control ... force has its way of maintaining control and order in an institution, but in here, if you use excessive force, then you're fired and losing your job. So—they're [management] telling us, “Do your job, but just don't get caught.”

Tim described working at the center of a structured contradiction. Governed and limited by the policies that controlled use of force, officers simultaneously found themselves faced with situations where they perceived force as the only option to maintain institutional order. Participants told me they received instructions from management that they “do their job” with studiously limited guidance on exactly what that entailed. The subsequent interpretive dynamic shifted from officer to officer. Thomas (HBCC, 30-year veteran), an experienced sergeant, was critical: “We can't do it the old school way, 'cause really, hitting a guy is not gonna make him change his behavior down the road.” Thomas spoke for a minority, however, as officers like Ethan (RVRC, 6 years' experience) interpreted matters differently: “Some of these new staff that doesn't want to fight—are you fucking kidding me? That's why they teach control tactics. ... You're going to get into a fight. It's like saying, you want to be a cop, but you don't want to use a pistol. What's wrong with you?” As Ethan's words imply, the organizational dynamics of prison work meant that the largest and most influential group of officers supported using force as a disciplinary measure. Furthermore, experienced COs described force as an unofficial part of maintaining order, something they passed on to younger staff.

The relationship between force and supervision created tacit agreements between COs and managers. Ericson (2007), applying work by Ignatieff, described tacit contracts between police and potential offenders where police turn a blind eye to minor crimes in exchange for information. These contracts implicitly shape what police consider a “real” crime and subsequently enforce. In the prisons I entered, similar contracts existed between managers and officers. Lane, a front-line manager, described an “if you do it don’t tell me” approach to control measures: “When you’re working on the back units, you know every unit’s doing some shady stuff. But you don’t really care, as long as it doesn’t come to your notice. Have at ‘er, just as long as I don’t know about it. Go ahead” (field note, December 2016). Tacit agreements between managers and front-line officers opened the door for significant uses of force:

Ricky (SCC, 16-year veteran): You gotta run the prison. ... Management knows. There’s been a few incidents over the years, where staff have been assaulted and stuff like that. And they know full well we kicked the shit out of the guy. And it’s not investigated, it’s not looked into, it’s just, “That needed to happen,” right?

The contradiction and implicit responsabilization at the center of this dynamic created distinctive forms of risk that officers negotiated carefully. Ricky demonstrates this by describing how managers tacitly condoned assaults where officers provided enough plausible deniability. Yet, even though officers discussed tacit bargains around use of force within the managerialist framework, they did so alongside the possibility of investigations and disciplinary actions, emphasizing the importance of doing such actions “correctly.”

4.3 | Constructing and Outsourcing Disciplinary Force

By carefully considering legality and policy interpretation, COs crafted strategies enabling them to use force within the prison’s bureaucratic framework. There were distinctive “right” and “wrong” ways to do this:

Tyler (RVRC, 2 years’ experience): Yeah. He [an incarcerated man] calls me onto fight, I lose my cool. I got in trouble for this. Almost got fired. I grabbed the kid and slapped him across the face. I think he needed it, personally, but you can’t—I learned something about this place. That’s not how you solve your problems. That’s *not* how you solve your problems here. These guys win when I do that (emphasis in original).

Learning the proper or “smart” way to use force was a crucial part of officer socialization. Tyler described this incident as a mistake: Not only had he broken prison policy boundaries and received official discipline for this assault, but also he had let incarcerated people “win” the encounter by losing his temper. Officers described such thuggish brutality as a “stupid” mistake and employed strategies to make sure coworkers did not engage in it. Heather, a 25-year veteran of CRI, described the resulting dynamic as “I have to watch out for you, you have to watch out for me because if I start to go to town on the guy, for whatever reason, you need to get me off of him. You need to see that I’ve lost it and I need to be either physically pulled off or told to get the fuck out.” These restrictions created distinct limits on what kinds of force were appropriate and helped officers protect themselves. COs viewed coworkers who pushed such limits as hazards: “I think the ones who are absolute idiots are going to cause problems for the rest of us. Everybody else is like, ‘Get

rid of those guys” (Anna, RVRC, 5 years’ experience). Heather agreed, stating, “Any officer who would hit an inmate in handcuffs should be fired. . . . How stupid are you!?”

Officers suggested that effective, disciplinary force was unemotional and carefully controlled. Both Tyler and Heather’s excerpts describe emotion, rather than legality, as the most significant problem when it came to force, something Zach (HBCC, 17-year veteran) expanded on:

I was taught how to do it. When, where, how. . . . If you’re going to do that [beat someone], you can’t be emotional. You can’t be one of the people involved in it cause you’re not thinking straight. No, you’re out purely for revenge. You have to be goal oriented. You’re doing this to get whatever result—either to install fear or to stop them from doing what they’re doing in that moment, whatever it may be. You have to know why you’re doing it and you have to know when you’ve gained that. The second you’ve gained it you have to stop. Otherwise, it’s just a beating and it means nothing to them. It just makes them angry and, and resentful and now they’ve got a score to settle.

COs described the “smart” way to use force as limited in the sense that it stopped upon the achievement of specific objectives. Tactical, unemotional use of force was a valuable skill for COs, so much so that experienced officers unofficially taught it to younger staff. It was also something that some experienced front-line managers, like Joe, encouraged in subtle ways:

You need to have some fuckin’ knuckle draggers in the background, and you gotta harness them. And there’ll be a time that you’ll have to release ‘em. And it’s gonna happen. You *need* them. You cannot fault them for what they do. They are so. Good. At what they do (Field note, December 2016; emphasis in original).

Officers and managers never openly discussed the tacit bargain around violence, but it was well understood by all parties. Managers knew COs, especially “knuckle draggers” like Joe describes, were using force in ways that violated prison policy and/or criminal law. Officers, in turn, knew that they could employ such measures if they did it the “right” or “smart” way, thereby providing a cloak of plausible deniability.

COs created and maintained plausible deniability through two distinctive tactics. Rich (HBCC, 3 years’ experience) unintentionally provided a detailed explanation of the first tactic when critiquing a “stupid” coworker:

You’re too stupid to create a situation that the inmate swings on *you*. You just go and swing at the inmate. One of these days, you’re going to go to jail because one of these inmates will be smart enough to say, “The video of that, I want this guy charged.” And management is going to review it and they’re going to look at that and go “Okay.” ‘Cause [we don’t] have a strong enough union to be fighting stuff like that (emphasis in original).

Here, Rich describes the process of construction. I define construction as a process where COs preemptively create justifications for use-of-force decisions before acting. Construction deliberately considers policy and legal proscriptions when shaping action and is broader than provocation or incitation. COs told me that effectively constructed incidents helped underpin their ability to maintain institutional control by “sending a message” to incarcerated people about who “ran” the

units. Carrie (SCC/RVRC, 10 years' experience) told me, "If I'm responding to a fight, and you're in a fight, you're getting your ass drug across the frickin' floor and I'm doing my job. Plain and simple."

Constructing use-of-force incidents with an eye toward justification served as a potent strategy for officers as it allowed them to use significant levels of force without breaching legal or policy restrictions, thereby preempting managerial investigations and maintaining union protections. In other words, construction allowed COs to use "old-school" methods without falling afoul of the modern policy regime. Quinton (RVRC, 4 years' service) describes how he constructed one incident:

He kinda gives me like a green-light thing. Not a hard green light, but enough that I could justify it. Gave him the gears, he gets dragged out of the unit. I hit him once and he dropped, and then it was cuffs. But he was out for probably a minute ... it was a good hit. It was a solid hit, and it looked like I worked him over. His feet are dragging and his head was down and all that. And all of a sudden, the unit knew, you don't punk this CO, because if you do I'm going to come and deal with you.

This situation was typical of a constructed incident, one that allowed officers to "send a message" to the remainder of the unit. Here, Quinton describes looking for "a green light"—which means that the individual "kinda" provided justification for the use of force. Quinton deliberately sought out this justification before "dropping" the individual, even though the "green light" in question was not a direct or a distinctive threat to his safety (what he later described to me as a "hard green light"). Instead, this "green light" provided the bare minimum needed to justify the use of force he describes here. Consequently, Quinton's response had little to do with the level of threat presented by the incarcerated individual, but instead it centered on seizing an opportunity to use disciplinary force. Tellingly, Quinton's comments focus on the practical utility of this incident, especially the message it sent to other incarcerated people. An effectively constructed incident like this one allowed COs to reap the ostensible disciplinary benefits of using force, while meeting the bureaucratic standards that governed such actions.

Despite the care officers put into constructing incidents, using force was always a risky decision. CO union protections were limited, and brutality complaints often led to dismissal and criminal charges. Officers were aware of these limits and shared cautionary tales of "stupid" officers who had gone too far:

Carrie: They were blatantly stupid. Like, there's cameras everywhere, and guys [COs] beat the shit out of an inmate [while] he was handcuffed! Right on camera, kneed him like 16 times in the head and then dragged him by his ankles. He got fired.

Intelligent decision-making was a crucial part of using force, and officers valued colleagues who were "smart" in how they constructed incidents. Jessica (CRI, 11 years' experience) told me, "We have some good ones [officers], smart ones. You call them if you need something done." Being "smart" in how COs used force was crucial—as Carrie, who also described force as "doing my job" several paragraphs ago, points out in her excoriation of "stupid" and brutal coworkers. Officers were aware that union protections and tacit bargains with managers had limits and knew policy frameworks were weighted against them. As Roddy (RVRC, 5 years' service) described, "If the managers catch you, you're in big trouble. But the inmates and officers both know, and the inmates respect it, and the inmates listen to it" (Field note, March 2017). This approach

necessitated intelligent and risk-focused decision-making as front-line COs could not count on managers interpreting use-of-force incidents sympathetically. Such risks limited the scope of construction.

The inherent risks of “going hands-on” led to outsourcing, a second form of disciplinary control. I define outsourcing as a practice where COs explicitly or implicitly use coercive power relationships between incarcerated people to maintain institutional order. Josh (SCC and RVRC, 7 years’ employment) describes outsourcing this way: “[My partner and I], sometimes we’d just lock only the tier rep⁶ and cleaners up. . . . It’s like you can’t run your own unit properly, you guys are locked up for the shift. And we did it once or twice last year and the unit ran like perfect [after they were released], like for months after that.” Outsourcing shifted responsibility for unit management onto influential incarcerated people as COs like Josh informally punished these individuals for failing to control the actions of the larger group. The intent of such actions was to employ power relationships between incarcerated people in place of officer interventions. Tony (RVRC, 40-year veteran) elaborated, stating, “If it’s not a physical kind of punishment they [COs] render against the inmate, they manipulate things on the unit. Y’know, to somehow get back.”

Officers manipulated social dynamics in specific ways to outsource coercive force. Manipulations like Josh and Tony describe were as common as they were effective:

Ricky: Oh, you mean how we use the inmates for our own ends? I do that too. Easiest way to settle something down. Let’s say you have someone covering up [the windows and cameras]—I just cancel all exercise and tell the heavies on the unit that exercise is cancelled because of this guy. Just wait a little while, and presto! Everything comes off the window, the camera’s uncovered (Field note, December 2016).

Officers did not make these decisions thoughtlessly, nor were such actions a result of corruption, laziness, or loss of control, as other researchers have suggested (Calavita & Jenness, 2015; Walker, 2022). Rather, officers deliberately employed the structural advantages they possessed to give “heavy” individuals—people who possessed significant levels of street capital (Sandberg, 2008)—a meaningful stake in maintaining institutional order.

Officers framed outsourcing as a crucial part of prison work, a “smart” strategy allowing them to extend forms of coercive power beyond what they could personally justify within policy structures. Chan (RVRC, 10 years’ experience) spelled out how he intentionally considered power relationships when he assigned housing arrangements on a maximum-security gang unit:

I organized my units like this: The gang guys were all on one corner, and the heavies were all on the bottom tier. The troublemakers were on the middle tier. If the punks decided to make trouble and flood the cells, the heavies would get wet, and the heavies would take care of that. By having the heavies on the bottom tier, [I] was actually controlling the unit. . . . It happens all the time. You’re talking to the heavies, you say—“Listen: either I take care of it, or you take care of it.” “Why are we on lockup boss!?” “These punks are running everything, they’re ruining everything. So either you take care of it or I take care of it. No beatings or anything, that’s too far. I don’t want paperwork. But you settle it—you take care of it.” And they do.

⁶ Cleaners and tier reps were influential incarcerated people who served as the main liaison between officers and the broader incarcerated population in exchange for extra privileges.

Actions like Chan describes here allowed officers to harness power dynamics between incarcerated people—what Walker (2022) described as “the politics”—for their own purposes, thereby incentivizing rule compliance. Crucially, these practices had limits. Chan specifies “no beatings” as that was “too far,” and Josh told that he punishes his “idiot heavies” for punching someone in the face and leaving marks that a manager could ask questions about. Such limits ensured outsourcing did not attract overt management attention, thereby allowing it to occur within policy boundaries.

Enlisting incarcerated people into the project of maintaining prison order represented a potent control measure for officers who struggled to gain voluntary compliance. Outsourced control represented a modified reemergence of coercive power to complement “soft power” approaches (Crewe, 2011), with limited risk of detection. Officers had to carefully monitor such measures, however. Warren, a 30-year veteran of SCC, states:

You’ve got to be real careful. It’s good, and it works for you, if you give them a little bit of power. But you can’t give them so much that they run the unit—you can’t give up control of the unit. It works for a while, but when you do something they don’t like, [it backfires].

As Warren’s comments imply, outsourcing control was a delicate process. On the one hand, the risks inherent to the process were more manageable than going “hands on” and had equivalent payoffs if orchestrated correctly. But on the other hand, using “heavies” to do the dirty work of coercive control meant that officers effectively gave away their authority, with uncertain results. Each officer approached this differently. Chan and Josh clearly spelled out expectations to the people on their unit, whereas Warren more subtly structured housing arrangements and rewards to accomplish the same goals (Ibsen, 2013). COs carefully balanced how much authority they delegated: too much, and officers lost control of units, requiring major interventions, and attracting management criticism and investigation. Usefully, incarcerated people bore the worst consequences of failed outsourcing as officers carefully structured such actions to maintain plausible deniability. Outsourcing control complemented hands-on uses of force, and the ethos of maintaining institutional control far exceeded the potential risk of detection or problems around the welfare of incarcerated people (Schultz et al., 2021).

5 | DISCUSSION, AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND LIMITATIONS

Researchers have discussed the role of organizational culture in shaping problematic behaviors among police officers (Campeau, 2018; Ericson, 2007), but much less work exists around organizational behavior in prisons. This article partially fills this gap and suggests that viewing CO use of force as an organizational behavior may serve as a useful tool in theorizing inappropriate actions. This concerning view suggests that policy interventions intended to reduce officer brutality may be ineffective, challenging trends that focus on creating policy solutions to these issues.

The data presented here have implications for prisons, as well as for law enforcement more generally. For prisons, understanding CO use of force as an organizational behavior—an expected part of the job that officers skillfully negotiate—drives home the scope of the problem. Research has framed CO brutality as actions committed by “bad apples” who use officer culture to justify breaking institutional rules (Higgins et al., 2022). These data instead suggest force represents an

ingrained, systemic way of doing prison work with benefits for many institutional actors, something that has not changed since Marquart's research (1986a; Rembert et al., 2023). This finding is particularly obvious when we examine how tacit contracts influence construction and outsourcing decisions. Tacit contracts allow COs to work around policy frameworks if they effectively meet the relevant bureaucratic metrics that govern use of force (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). For the COs I interviewed, a meaningful portion of doing their job involves finding the sweet spot where they could effectively construct and/or outsource force while still providing managers with plausible deniability. For many COs, policy compliance means interpreting the rules in such a way that allows them to employ disciplinary force without triggering investigations, thereby—in their minds—effectively maintaining institutional control.

Rembert et al. (2023) described CO excessive use of force as “an inevitable feature of corrections work” (p. 105), and many researchers have tried to explain this by examining CO occupational cultures. Higgins et al. (2022) described how COs employ cultural norms to create a “warped badge of honor,” justifying negative attitudes (and, by implication, actions) toward incarcerated people. Likewise, Mears et al. (2022) suggested that exposure to harsh carceral settings leads officers to dehumanize incarcerated people. This article builds on these findings, but it also highlights the key role broader organizational frameworks play in shaping CO use of force. Occupational cultures justified COs' use of force and were a primary means that older officers used to teach “old-school” mindsets and techniques to new recruits. Furthermore, cultures were key tools COs used to differentiate between “smart” and “stupid” uses of force (Swidler, 1986). But in contrast to research that suggests COs act brutally because of cultures that defy the broader managerial project, my participants carefully negotiated organizational frameworks when making use-of-force decisions. Tacit bargains, implicit responsabilization, and loose couplings between policy and day-to-day practice all worked to create an organizational blind spot in the prisons I entered, a blind spot that implicitly coached COs to use disciplinary use of force as part of their job. These structures spurred use-of-force decisions, but the same factors that created this blind spot also created limits on what actions officers could justify, necessitating construction and outsourcing to create plausible deniability. When presented with moments where force was an option, my participants relied on occupational cultures to recognize the opportunity (Higgins et al., 2022; Mears et al., 2022), but they ended up making the decision based on whether the opportunity was “smart” with relation to broader organizational frameworks.

By examining how COs think about organizational frameworks when making use-of-force decisions, we can understand how structural aspects of prison administration shape CO use-of-force decisions. The differences between “smart” and “stupid” uses of force are particularly useful in outlining these nuances. Officers openly critiqued brutality, describing thuggish coworkers as stupid and overemotional, and portraying their actions as a hazard. Their critiques related to how these individuals used force, rather than to the use of force itself, as my participants contrasted mindless brutality with focused, smart uses of force that silently underpinned the soft power measures they employed every day (Crewe, 2011). In this manner, use of force served as an effective means of “sending a message” to incarcerated people without drawing attention to themselves. Officers framed construction as “doing my job,” while co-opting institutional politics (Walker, 2022) allowed COs to productively subvert prison subcultural dynamics in support of institutional goals (Roth, 2020; Skarbek, 2014).

These manipulations and interpretations of broader organizational frameworks were so common that COs regularly pointed to them as marking the difference between a “good” and a “bad” officer. “Good” officers, who knew how to construct and outsource force without losing control, could achieve organizational goals by significantly reducing institutional disorder without

drawing management attention. “Bad” officers, who were brutal or unable to effectively outsource control, drew managerial attention to themselves. Construction and outsourcing were critical tools within this dialectic (Swidler, 1986), and consequently, officers described them as normalized actions expected of them by policy, managers, coworkers, and (in some cases) even incarcerated people. Understood in this disturbingly utilitarian manner, prison staff framed coercive control as an organizational behavior, a required element of doing a “good” job with productive and useful outcomes.

The distressingly quotidian way officers describe use of force also provides clues into why officer cultures continue to reproduce archaic “old-school” values, despite years of managerial interventions (Higgins et al., 2022). Broader organizational frameworks ensure that prison work takes place outside of the public eye, meaning that COs transmit cultural values with limited external challenge. This finding represents a clear difference between COs and police officers: even though police cultures are a concern (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021), police officers’ use-of-force decisions are increasingly subject to challenges in the media and from online civilian observation and adjudication (Singh, 2017). Such challenges draw public attention and force change even if it is slow and reluctant. CO cultures rarely experience these forms of challenge, making change glacial at best and nonexistent at worst and ensuring that “old-school” beliefs continue to exist underneath the surface (Arnold, 2016; Higgins et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the utility of disciplinary use of force to the broader institution ensures that tacit bargains between officers and management subtly reinforces the status quo, even when organizational messaging clearly states such actions are inappropriate (Campeau, 2018). The resulting position resembles Rubin and Reiter’s (2018) assessment of prison reform:

[P]enal technologies that are useful for administrative control purposes may fail to serve reformers’ and politicians’ purpose *a la mode*; thus, while it may appear that the field has moved away from supporting such technologies, administrators may continue to use them, albeit privately or quietly (p. 1610).

To COs and some administrators, coercive force represents a key penal technology, one that helps them accomplish their goal of maintaining order. Framing coercive force as an individual decision operating outside of the broader scope of prison operations (Carter, 2020; Rembert et al., 2023) allows administrators to “serve reformers’ and politicians’ purposes” (Rubin & Reiter, 2018, p. 1610) and highlight the “humane” and rights-based nature of modern prisons—at least, when it comes to public-facing narratives. Yet, structured discretion and tacit bargains around the use of force send a different message to front-line prison staff, who recognize both the hypocrisy of the situation and the opportunities such bargains afford them. The loose coupling between policy and enforcement (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) ensures that “old-school” cultural mores are reproduced alongside and underneath more palatable organizational goals.

To be clear, I do not intend this article as a critique of prison managers, who do difficult work with limited resources. Individual managers represent the face of the broader organization, and typically, they find themselves with more pressure, fewer protections, and less discretionary ability than the officers who critique them. If anything, these data highlight our need for new research on prison managers’ perspectives and relationships with COs. Management decisions, however, reveal significant flaws in the broader reforms that have transformed prisons during the past 30 years (Liebling et al., 2011). Bureaucratic managerialism was implemented to increase efficiency and prevent abuses, but flaws in the broader project are becoming increasingly clear (Bennett, 2023; Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2022). Although managerialism has brought positive reforms into

practice, loose couplings and tacit bargains (Ericson, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) have simultaneously reproduced problematic “old-school” methods within modern bureaucratic frameworks. New reforms, such as civilian oversight boards for prisons or policies eliminating tacit bargains, represent accessible short-term fixes. Band-aid solutions such as new policies, however, ignore larger systemic problems. Managerialism represents a meaningful reform intended to transform prisons—yet the day-to-day pressures of managing prisons seem to have co-opted the original intent of these reforms (Rubin & Reiter, 2018). Managerialism’s active role in shaping CO use-of-force decisions drives home the weaknesses of modern prison reform efforts, most of which are based on policy change (Page, 2011). This failing necessitates broader discussions on the nature of policy reforms in prisons and the philosophies used to justify them.

This article also has relevance to a broader scope of criminological research. Although the organizational behavior of prison staff represents the main object of analysis here, the findings have relevance to the exercise of power in the criminal legal system more generally. Concepts like construction and “green lights” may have utility in helping explain how groups like police officers justify problematic use-of-force incidents or stop-and-search policies.⁷ Understanding how other criminal justice actors perceive the interpretation and implementation of policies within their workplaces may also reveal bureaucratic blind spots unique to those agencies, thereby explaining inconsistencies between organizational mission and day-to-day actions (Campeau, 2018; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Looking for organizational blind spots and examining how criminal justice actors perceive and engage with such blind spots seems an obvious area for future research.

This article also has limitations that point to areas for future research. Examining use of force in another prison system, or in countries with different political climates and/or attitudes around officer–management relationships, may reveal different officer perspectives on policy frameworks (Symkovich, 2019). Alternatively, such research may reveal different forms of tacit bargains due to differences in hierarchical relationships. My positionality as a former CO meant officers were comfortable discussing use-of-force decisions with me, but other researchers may uncover different insights into management–staff relationships, something worthy of far more investigation when it comes to understanding modern prisons (McGuin, 2015). Finally, I focus on the perspectives of front-line prison staff. Research with managers, administrators, and political actors on the same topic may reveal different nuances around use of force, something that emphasizes a need for research with criminal legal system decision-makers.

6 | CONCLUSION

Prisons have radically changed during the past 30 years (Liebling et al., 2011). Yet, despite meaningful shifts in the way prisons are organized, I argue that coercive use of force continues to play a central role in how prison staff maintain order. On the one hand, this finding is no surprise as formerly incarcerated people have suggested as much for years (Novisky et al., 2022). On the other hand, the role that organizational cultures play in shaping force are undertheorized, setting this article apart from other accounts. Although the violence described here is different from what Marquart (1986a) outlined, this article demonstrates that coercive force and “hard” power continue to play a role in underpinning “soft power” measures that characterize modern prisons (Crewe, 2011). So-called “misconduct” may not therefore represent a dramatic breach of normative standards (Rembert et al., 2023). Instead, I suggest that we may more productively understand

⁷ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insightful point.

CO brutality complaints as actions breaching the tacit bargains that govern use of force within prisons' managerial frameworks (Bennett, 2023; Ericson, 2007). Attempting to understand CO violence outside of the organizational cultures of the modern, bureaucratic prison limits our ability to meaningfully intervene and prevent unethical uses of force.

Unfortunately, the implications of this article also suggest such interventions may be difficult. Attempts to "fix" organizational behaviors usually imply the creation and implementation of new reforms or more policies (Petersilia & Cullen, 2015). This approach represents a distinctive problem when we consider force as an organizational behavior, given how COs describe policy as a major influence on their use-of-force decisions. This article also suggests that modern best practices in managing prisons may be fundamentally flawed. Tacit bargains, "green lights," construction, and outsourcing all represent significant gaps in the managerial project and suggest that "soft power" may still rely on the continued existence of "hard power" in modified form (Crewe, 2011). The implications of such findings are complex, requiring a broader and more critical approach to prison research.

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How to cite this article: Schultz, W. J. (2023). Correctional officers and the use of force as an organizational behavior. *Criminology*, 61, 654–675.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12346>

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