



# Canadian correctional officers, institutionalization, and the social impacts of prison work

Incarceration

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## Abstract

Researchers often use institutionalization to explain the psychological impact of imprisonment on incarcerated people, but little is known about how institutionalization processes may impact other actors in prison, such as correctional officers (COs). New research consistently describes prison work as a damaging experience, something that significantly impacts short and long-term health outcomes of COs. A broad reading of the institutionalization literature demonstrates remarkable similarities to CO mental health research, raising questions about whether institutionalization frameworks can help us understand prison work. We draw on 131 interviews with Canadian COs to examine this possibility, and find that COs draw broad institutionalization narratives framing prison work as a distinctly harmful experience with lasting impacts on their personalities, identities, and relationships. We conclude by discussing the implications of using institutionalization as a means of understanding correctional work.

## Keywords

Correctional officers, prisonization, institutionalization, prison work, mental health, latent culture

## Introduction

Haney's (2003) research on institutionalization provides an account of the psychological consequences of imprisonment, detailing how incarcerated people are psychologically shaped, or 'prisonized' (Clemmer, 1940: 299), by their time in custody. Institutionalization and prisonization<sup>1</sup> processes culminate in many individual-level psychological changes (Haney, 2012). For incarcerated

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people, these changes manifest as adaptations in response to the pains of imprisonment, a set of deprivations that exist within the prison environment (Haney, 2003; Sykes, 1958). Prisonization research focuses on incarcerated people and their difficult experiences of adjustment post-release (Martin, 2018), but modern conceptualizations also relate to parents, children, and romantic partners of incarcerated people—all of whom have connections to prisons (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018; Comfort, 2003; Reizabal et al., 2023). However, current analyses of institutionalization effects are limited to incarcerated people and their associates, meaning there is little insight into whether these processes may explain the experiences of other groups.

Research on correctional officers (COs) consistently describes prison work as a damaging experience that negatively impacts the physical and mental health outcomes of correctional staff (Frost and Monteiro, 2020; Ricciardelli, 2019; Schultz, 2022; Smith, 2021; Wills et al., 2021). A broad reading of the institutionalization literature demonstrates remarkable similarities to CO mental health research, raising questions about whether prisonization might explain social and psychological changes experienced by COs. We draw on 131 semi-structured interviews with Canadian COs to examine this overlap and answer the following research questions: 1. How do officers describe prison work as harmful, and which parts do they specifically identify? and 2. Do these narratives justify a broader application of prisonization to COs?

## Literature review

Clemmer (1940: 299) defines prisonization as ‘the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary’. Haney (2003: 38) updates and modernizes this definition, defining it as ‘the incorporation of the norms of prison life into one’s habits of thinking, feeling, and acting’. Haney outlines several harmful psychological changes that result from institutionalization, including hypervigilance, distrust, suspicion, alienation, social withdrawal, isolation, psychological distancing, and emotional overcontrol (2003: 42). These adaptations reduce incarcerated peoples’ ability to productively navigate interpersonal and family relationships post-release (Haney, 2003; Martin, 2018).

Researchers have built on these insights and now widely employ institutionalization as an analytical tool to explain other groups’ experiences with prisons. Comfort (2003) argues that women visiting prison experience ‘secondary prisonization, a weakened but still compelling version of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives’ of incarcerated people (2003: 101). Incarcerated peoples’ family members consequently experience reduced rights, fewer resources, and marginalization. Aiello and McCorkel (2018) develop this concept, identifying elements of secondary prisonization in the experiences of children visiting mothers in prison. Likewise, Reizabal et al. (2023) discuss the psychological effects of secondary prisonization on older adults with incarcerated children.

This work has expanded and applied prisonization to groups beyond incarcerated people. However, such research has tended to focus on associates of incarcerated people, rather than on people who work in prison (Ricciardelli, 2019). Scholarship on COs instead tends to focus on their roles as powerholders, who enforce rules and reproduce the controls incarcerated people experience (Applegate et al., 2023; Crewe, 2011a; Schultz et al., 2021; Williams and Liebling, 2023). These analyses overlap with CO culture research and identify broadly negative impacts of officer subcultures on how prison staff act toward incarcerated people (Schoenfeld and Everly, 2023; Schultz, 2023a). CO cultures are characterized by hypermasculine values of physical and mental toughness (Ricciardelli, 2019), and Higgins et al. (2022) suggest these cultures play a

key role in shaping negative interactions between COs and incarcerated people. Schoenfeld and Everly (2023: 232) further describe an officer 'security mindset', a set of behavioural norms that emerge from CO culture and govern their behaviour toward incarcerated people. These norms are primarily concerned with limiting relationships with incarcerated people to matters of 'official business', thereby distancing officers from rehabilitative goals and creating a hostile 'us-versus-them' attitude among officers (Schoenfeld and Everly, 2023: 234). Prospective COs have these values engrained into them during their training and reinforced at every stage of their careers (Adorjan and Ricciardelli, 2023; Eriksson, 2023). Schultz (2023b: 4) has recently argued that these processes create a 'vulnerability axiom' for officers, as COs' perceptions of vulnerability become a central lens shaping nearly every part of how officers perceive their work and their relationships with incarcerated people and other COs.

Research on COs and prison staff is currently undergoing significant expansion (Arnold et al., 2023; Brierley, 2023; Higgins et al., 2023). As Ricciardelli (2019: 64) notes, 'working in prison or living in prison – both ways to experience prison – shapes both correctional workers and those in custody', and much of the new scholarship implicitly focuses on how prison work damages COs. Research on officer mental health reveals major impacts of prison work on the long-term mental wellness of correctional staff in Canada and the United States (Carleton et al., 2018), and research by Frost and Monteiro (2020) highlights elevated levels of suicide among COs, with rates considerably exceeding the national average. Likewise, Wills et al. (2021) suggest that officers are unlikely to seek mental health help, citing hypermasculine institutional cultures and concerns surrounding stigma, confidentiality, and punitive responses to self-disclosure.

Officer cultural responses exacerbate mental health issues. Researchers suggest that COs react to external situations in ways consistent with the embodied identity, or *habitus*, of being a prison worker (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Haggerty and Bucerius, 2021; Lerman, 2013). Officers embody suspicion, techniques designed to mitigate risk and reduce vulnerability, and conformance to an 'us versus them' attitude in solidarity with other officers (Ricciardelli, 2019; Schultz, 2023b; Worley et al., 2023). As Lerman notes, COs frequently develop a 'hardened workplace persona' characterized by 'rigidity, aloofness, or even aggression', which poses a threat to their relationships beyond the prison walls when their actions do not align with expected social roles (2013: 126). Unsurprisingly, research suggests these values damage CO relationships with people outside of prison (Higgins et al., 2023). Garrihy (2022) describes how COs view themselves as socially tainted by the socially 'dirty' nature of their work (Hughes, 1958), something which reduces officers' ability to connect with family and friends. Likewise, Eriksson (2023: 329) identifies how COs reframe their roles by infusing positive values into their work, thereby 'reframing their work as something to be proud of, a badge of honour, for the worker'. Both Garrihy and Eriksson describe taint management as a key method that officers use to reduce the damaging and often stigmatizing characteristics of prison work (Ricciardelli, 2019). However, such tactics also lead to suspicion and isolation (Higgins et al., 2023).

COs face significant identity changes and mental health impacts because of their experiences within the prison (Ricciardelli, 2019; Wills et al., 2021). The notoriously volatile environment that characterizes high-security North American prisons (Bucerius et al., 2023; Worley et al., 2023) also means that COs experience significant levels of vulnerability and uncertainty as part of their work (Ricciardelli et al., 2022; Schultz, 2023b). Much of the existing research discusses prison work as a life-altering experience and often implies that learning and embodying the CO *habitus* is deeply harmful on personal, emotional, and relational levels (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Higgins et al., 2023). These findings share strong similarities with research describing the

negative post-release experiences of incarcerated people, which are often explained via prisonization processes (Haney, 2003; Martin, 2018). However, Maycock et al.'s (2020) work on through-care support workers appears to be the only time researchers have used institutionalization to understand CO work. Throughcare support officers, who were employed in the community after previously working as prison officers, expressed difficulties moving past the hypervigilance required in prison settings, missed 'the regularity of prison routine', and described needing a period of adjustment to navigate the renewed autonomy provided in the community setting (Maycock et al., 2020: 367). This account sheds light on the impact of prison work on COs' professional lives but only insofar as it relates to a shift in geographical setting, leaving a broader gap in how we understand the psychological and social impacts of prisonization processes on COs.

When viewed through the lens of institutionalization, similarities between the prisonization literature and research on CO experiences become apparent. Incarceration impacts the mental health of both incarcerated people and officers (Lerman, 2013; Lerman et al., 2022; Wills et al., 2021), with consequences that last long after leaving prison (Frost and Monteiro, 2020; Warr, 2016). Looming threats of violence impact both carceral and officer subcultures (Bucerius et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2023), which negatively impact individuals' ability to deal with the challenges of broader society (Garrihy, 2022; Martin, 2018). Finally, the social taint of prison negatively impacts how both COs and formerly incarcerated people relate to loved ones (Eriksson, 2023; McDonald et al., 2023). The similarities between these literatures raise questions about whether institutionalization processes may serve as an effective tool for understanding the unique challenges facing prison workers and prisons more broadly.

## Method

We draw on 131 semi-structured qualitative interviews with COs across four provincial prisons in Western Canada, collected as part of the University of Alberta Prison Project (see Bucerius et al., 2023; Schultz et al., 2021).<sup>2</sup> Provincial prisons, which house most of Canada's incarcerated people (Statistics Canada, 2023), include both sentenced prisons and remand centres. Sentenced prisons have varying security levels and are responsible for housing people sentenced to less than two years. Remand centres hold those awaiting trial for crimes ranging in severity and are all considered maximum-security facilities. We conducted interviews with officers from two remand centres, one sentenced prison, and one mixed institution. The remand centres held approximately 1600 and 700 individuals, respectively. The sentenced prison housed about 300 individuals, and the mixed facility held around 500 individuals who were either remanded (70%) or sentenced (30%). These institutions were largely representative of Western Canadian prisons in terms of size, programming, and population.

We interviewed 55 officers working at the remand centres and 76 officers at the sentenced prisons. One hundred participants were White men, 10 were Black, Indigenous, or other men of colour, and the remaining 21 were women, one of whom was Indigenous and the remainder White. This sample generally reflected officer demographics in these institutions. We recruited participants through email invitations from prison administration, pre-shift meeting announcements, and chain referral (or 'snowball') sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Most participants agreed to participate after we had spent time on their units and had built relationships. This recruitment method is common in CO research (Crawley, 2004).

To ensure interview consistency, we asked participants questions from a generalized prompt guide. Scripted prompts included, 'Tell us a little bit about your job responsibilities and work

history in the correctional system' and 'What kind of challenges do you encounter in your work?' However, we allowed participants' unique experiences to shape the direction of each interview, meaning that officers elaborated on topics relevant to their perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We provided each participant with a detailed consent form, which explained the ethical protocols of the study and described how they could remove their information from the study if they chose. We requested permission to digitally record interviews, which all participants included here granted. Some officers asked that we pause the recordings when they discussed sensitive topics, such as the use of force or corrupt colleagues (Schultz, 2023a). When ethically appropriate, we asked permission to restart the recorders. Overall, interviews averaged 50 min in length and were transcribed verbatim. During transcription, we removed identifying information from the interviews and assigned randomly generated pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

We drew on grounded theory methods to initially analyze our data (Charmaz, 2014). The study's principal investigators and two research assistants<sup>3</sup> read six randomly chosen interviews and identified themes emerging from these data (Schultz et al., 2023). We verified the overall strengths of patterns by tabulating the themes, thereby identifying cases that deviated from these patterns as well as similarities and differences in these data. We continued to test this scheme against randomly chosen transcripts, adjusting and redefining concepts as required until we consistently reached 85%–90% overlap between coders. Having thereby established interrater reliability, we then coded all transcripts line-by-line using Nvivo software. This process led to codes including 'Life outside the walls' ( $n = 43$ , with 109 references), 'Mental health' ( $n = 33$ , with 89 references), and 'Perceived vulnerability' ( $n = 61$ , with 269 references). This approach left us with a limited cross-sectional data set, which prevented us from identifying changes over time. However, these codes allowed us to identify a large body of narratives that officers used to detail their perceptions of how prison work had changed them. For this article, we studied these accounts through narrative analysis, allowing our participants' storied experiences and their subjective accounts of work-related personal change to be the central objects of discussion (Presser and Sandberg, 2015; Schultz et al., 2023).

## Findings

### *Perceptions of socialization*

Our participants spent much of their time inside prisons, and described undergoing socialization processes that helped them 'become' a CO. While these processes included formal training and education (Adorjan and Ricciardelli, 2023), officers also crafted narratives detailing how this process shifted their worldviews. Participants described skepticism and distrust as crucial tools in doing their work, and provided examples 'proving' how the development of such attitudes helped them avoid manipulation (Schoenfeld and Everly, 2023). As Jane phrased it, 'You need to adapt and realize what will work behind the walls'. Cumulatively, COs described undergoing a mental hardening process that allowed them to deal with the chaos of daily prison work and helped them achieve desirable, high-status positions on 'tough' units: 'the hardened, don't-give-a-fuck-anymore guys [COs] typically go to Max Pod' (Matt).

Officers described fostering specific social traits that helped them achieve these adaptations. Some COs cultured edgy personality characteristics, such as displaying 'crazy' and unpredictable behaviours designed to intimidate incarcerated people:

Ethan: I'll talk to them. Have a conversation with them. And I'm polite to them. I say thank you and you're welcome. And they're looking at me all weird—what's wrong with this guy, right? And [a few minutes later] they'll see me blow up on a guy who'll just fuckin' shit-talk me right? They'll see night and day.

COs like Ethan suggested that volatile personality traits helped deter potentially assaultive clients. Experienced COs sometimes expressed pride in how effectively they had embodied their edgy personalities (Higgins et al., 2023) and described officers who were uncomfortable with such attitudes as a problem: '[a manager told me,] "y'know, you're very intimidating." And I just [said], "You tell me I'm too fucking intimidating in a jail?! I'm not too intimidating! They're [other COs] too weak!!"' (Carrie). Carrie and officers like her expressed pride in how thoroughly they had adapted to institutional norms, and described teaching these values to young COs to initiate them into the 'right' way of doing the job (Waddington, 1999).

A proportion of officers, perhaps 20% of the sample, agreed with Carrie and Ethan's perspectives, using their narratives to highlight the utility of institutional socialization on CO work. The remaining officers were more ambivalent: while they suggested that 'crazy' and 'intimidating' attitudes had a role in helping to control prisons (Schultz, 2023a), they also suggested that embodying these attitudes created problems in other parts of their lives. Harry, a young officer with about a year's experience, described how he perceived the contrast between prison and 'normal' society: 'It's [prison] its own world. I'll go there, and ... almost anything goes, I think. It's kinda crazy. But it kinda makes sense. It's its own world. And when you go outside, you kinda appreciate this out here.' While Harry camouflaged his discomfort with prison socialization processes by intimating that 'crazy' attitudes 'kinda' made sense, Cody (10 years' experience) was more forthright: 'No one wants to tell you this but you're probably not going to be the same in a year.'

Cody spoke for many COs. Even officers who justified adopting 'tough' attitudes as 'part of the job' admitted that personality changes associated with prison work had consequences:

Tina: If you met me three years ago before I was a correctional officer, you'd be like, 'Wow, you're a completely different person'. I'm not at all the same person I was coming into this. I've changed so much. And a lot of it is good for me, like I kind of needed that. But the other part is just—I'm not the same person that I was. I was completely different. I'm a lot more negative. And I thought I was negative before, but I'm a lot more negative. And I have less patience. And I used to have a lot of patience because I used to teach little kids. And I loved teaching. But now, I have no patience and I'm just ... the way I see things and see people is completely different. Like, you don't see me think people are good, ever. I see all the negative, all the bad, all the time. And the outcomes are always bad and always negative.

Tina used her experiences to craft a broad narrative of dispositional change, one which suggested that work-related personality shifts were functional in prison but created painful trade-offs when it came to interacting with people in 'normal' society. Reflecting broader institutionalization patterns (Martin, 2018), COs described employing prison-based dispositions in community interactions, even when such approaches were unnecessary (Higgins et al., 2023). Tina's story demonstrates how this process played out for many COs. By directly contrasting her previous job, where she had 'a lot of patience' and 'taught little kids', with the prison, she highlights the harsh and

pessimistic lenses that characterized her interactions with people outside of work. Tina described this shift in negative terms, identifying how she exclusively perceived ‘all the bad, all the time’. Her narratives also express a sense of loss, as she voices regret about losing the patient part of herself that used to love teaching little children (Presser and Sandberg, 2015).

Officers like Tina explained shifts in their personality through narratives of institutionalization, identifying prison work as something that negatively and intrusively shaped other aspects of their lives. As Haney notes, prisonization involves ‘natural and normal adaptations made by prisoners in response to the unnatural and abnormal conditions of prisoner life’ (2003: 38). COs described a similar process, telling us how they had taken ‘natural and normal adaptations’ to the prison environment and had internalized them, sometimes to ‘extreme lengths’ (Haney, 2003: 39). This process harmed relationships with people outside of the prison. Elisa discussed how embodying prison-based attitudes placed stress on her family: ‘I found, I think it was around the two-to-three-year mark, I became really negative. My family were, basically that’s the point they were like “You fucking changed”. Like, “This is a big deal.”’ While COs justified harsh outlooks by pointing out how they helped them avoid manipulation at work, many participants simultaneously drew narratives describing how these attitudes created friction with loved ones: ‘[My] mom, talking to me now as compared to before I moved away four or five years ago, she’s like, “[you’ve] become more guarded, and [have] more of a negative outlook”’ (Archie). Officers like Archie described work socialization as something that negatively impacted family relationships, echoing the impacts of prisonization on formerly incarcerated people (Haney, 2003; Martin, 2018). In Samuel’s words, ‘I realized that taking that direction would ruin my whole family life ... The constant negativity of dealing with these [incarcerated] guys and dealing with your own guys [officers]—it can be hard’.

Officers consistently described prison work as something that damaged their perceptions of people and their ability to build friendships outside of work. Luke centred his CO identity when he explained why he had trouble making new friends: ‘Your professional capacity is defined by you constantly meeting new people that are just generally shitty human beings, you know what I mean? You’re less inclined to be welcoming to new people that you see’ (Luke). Other officers agreed, explaining that their occupational experiences led them to automatically assume the worst in others. Cooper agreed: ‘[if] you’re at a [job] stint anywhere for nine years, you’re gonna sort of bend and form to that culture ... [here,] you really end up hating people. You really do. Like people, just in general’. Cooper, who worked at one of the remand centres, directly attributed his ‘hatred’ for ‘people in general’ to his work experiences and suggested such views shaped the CO *habitus*, or embodied working personality (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Haggerty and Bucierius, 2021; Higgins et al., 2023; Lerman, 2013). Asher agreed: ‘I’m different since I started this job. I’ve always been naturally untrusting of people, but even more so now. I always feel like people are trying to rip me off, or ... take advantage of me, which they never will’ (Asher). Participants like Asher described experiencing paranoia when interacting with non-COs, and suggested that dispositions drawn from the social world of prison impaired their ability to trust and talk with people.

Unsurprisingly, participants suggested these pressures had long-term consequences. Elizabeth elaborated on how prison work isolated her from friends: ‘You don’t talk, your friends are people in the jail. You don’t know how to make friends with normal people. All you know is who you work with. And that’s all, who you kind of surround yourself around “cause that’s your comfort.”’ Participants suggested that the norms of prison work became the most salient features of their social lives, shaping the community environment they had access to. Elizabeth even

suggested that prison work altered how she viewed friendships and relationships, so much so that she had married another CO and sought comfort exclusively from ‘people in the jail’. As Steven summed it up, ‘I think actually working in this environment does it to every one of us. It takes a toll on our personality over the years’.

### *Latent social identity*

Becker and Geer (1960) suggest that workers’ behaviour outside of their jobs influences what and who they are at their jobs and vice versa, a concept they define as latent social identity. Latent social identity refers to how individuals ‘carry culture with them’ into settings where such cultures have their ‘origin[s] and social support in a group other than the one in which the members are now participating’ (Becker and Geer, 1960: 305–306). The impact of latent culture and latent identity is especially clear when the setting in question does not *require* such a response, leading to negative impacts on relationships and identity (Becker and Geer, 1960).

COs described values like hypervigilance and suspicion as key tools helping to keep them safe in prison (Garrihy, 2022; Wills et al., 2021), part of a larger manifest culture that assisted them in responding to the shared problems of prison work (Becker and Geer, 1960; Higgins et al., 2022). These frames fed a broader, latent culture, which emerged when COs used tools that were culturally appropriate to prison in response to problems arising in the community—something that directly contributed to negative interactions with people outside prison (Garrihy, 2022; Higgins et al., 2023). When interviewed, Lukas had recently quit his job as a CO after ten years, and described prison-related behavioural changes as long-lasting and damaging:

Lukas: I take the [commuter] train to work every morning. And people that worked with me in corrections and know that I worked in the jail can’t believe that. And the first three months of taking the train to work, I did it for the single reason that I wanted to recondition myself into having to put myself into uncomfortable positions in public settings, where I was forced to psychologically get over those feelings ... because for ten years of corrections, I’m still like this—if I’m walking beside my wife, and she veers behind me even a little bit, I reach out my arm and make sure I can see her, right away. I always have to have people in front of me.

Lukas suggested that his prison-based latent social identity added significant complexity to how he adjusted to a new career. COs described avoiding public spaces where they might encounter former clients, with many participants specifically identifying malls and public transit as particularly risky (Higgins et al., 2023). Lukas’s time as a CO had socialized him to focus on the dangers these settings presented (Schultz, 2023b), and he described using his latent social identity to mitigate risks when none were present. His efforts to prevent his partner from walking behind him reflect these techniques, as COs across the sample consistently described ensuring that nobody was behind them in prison or casual social settings. Lukas recognized how his work had changed him and assessed the attitudes of the CO social group he had left as ‘... a different world. It’s like living on an island over there. It’s a colony’. He also described intentionally seeking out uncomfortable situations to help undo his CO latent identity and reverse the broader prisonization processes he described (Haney, 2003).

Many participants described similar experiences—but unlike Lukas, they continued to work in prison, meaning they often justified prison-based attitudes as useful means of addressing risk perceptions (Schultz, 2023b). Consequently, many officers narrated steps they took to *strengthen* their



latent social identities despite the identity and behavioural changes. Officers suggested these cultural frames impacted a broad range of quotidian matters outside of the prison (Higgins et al., 2023), even shaping how participants interacted with their environment:

Chan: I stop at doors ... especially mall doors for some reason. I'll wait for the click [for the door to open]. I'll walk up to the door—everyone's walking through, right there. They're right there! Next door! They're walking through it! I will wait for that click. It's something psychological. Seven years in prison—I can't blame [myself]. It's a habit.

COs did not control doors in the prisons and relied on officers working in central command posts to open them remotely. The 'click' Chan describes refers to a distinctive sound indicating the unlocking of cell doors. While functional at work, Chan and other officers described embarrassing scenes where they waited for doors to open in places like malls and supermarkets, thereby attracting public attention for breaking social norms. As this implies, participants often described how prison norms impacted their environmental perceptions outside of work, something particularly obvious in narratives discussing restaurants and crowded social events:

Cathy: I really don't like having my back [to the] door. You just like to keep an eye on things. You're in a good spot, you can see everything. You always feel like you're still—not on high alert, but still watching your back more and you're just more aware of everything around you. I'm just constantly watching people now. Whereas before, [I'd] just go for drinks, just enjoy the drinks rather than look at every person in the restaurant.

Randy: You can usually tell the corrections officer—you know, short hair, cut on the sides so there's nowhere to hold on to, and if anything is suspicious [they're] sitting in the back with their back to the wall.

Cathy's comments demonstrate how quickly prison work changed officers' latent social identities. Despite working as a CO for less than six months when interviewed, Cathy described routinely employing institutional risk mitigation techniques outside of work, such as keeping her back to the wall to monitor her surroundings. Randy, a more experienced officer, developed on this by outlining how COs embodied their latent social identities, as he kept his hair cut short to mitigate the risk of someone grabbing his hair in a physical confrontation (Higgins et al., 2023). Participants described routinely using prison-based cultural solutions to address broader perceptions of risk outside of the prison setting. Echoing Cathy and Randy's points, Asher told us 'When I go to the malls, I'm scanning. I'm just looking for threats'. Asher's continual application of his latent social identity had measurable negative effects: 'Go to restaurants, sit with your back to the wall, you're with a date or a friend, and ... they don't have your attention because you're doing that, right?'

Participants like Asher suggested that the effects of CO latent social identities were intrusive and unwelcome, shaping feelings of paranoia that damaged social interactions and relationship-building (Schultz, 2022). Counterintuitively, such experiences deepened CO ties to prison: 'in this job alone, people are sitting here going, "I don't mind working in the jail, it's alright. But I would rather do something else". But there is nothing else for them to do' (Jason). Although many officers expressed a desire to leave prison work, COs like Jason drew narratives suggesting that the institutional mindsets and latent social identity emerging from their work had 'spoiled' their chances for other forms of employment (Eriksson, 2023; Garrihy 2022).

### *Psychological taint and latent social identities*

Participants presented narratives that linked prison work with painful emotional changes they experienced in their broader lives and suggested these were closely associated with the social taint of prison work (Eriksson, 2023). Garrihy (2022) applies the concept of psychological dirt to describe contrasting expectations between what CO work requires and behaviours that are socially appropriate in non-prison settings. As he discusses, COs develop ‘psychological tools’, including hyper-vigilant suspicion, to manage work-related uncertainty (Garrihy, 2022: 988).

Participants in our sample described such adaptations as necessary but harmful. Social taint meant that COs felt they had limited options when it came to who might understand their struggles. Participants cited concerns about judgment, inability to relate, and trying to protect loved ones from the ‘reality’ of prison work. Luke described struggling to relate to people:

Luke: I really don’t have a lot of friends beyond that [law enforcement] because it’s just tough to relate with them on anything ... You find it difficult to really relate to people even in your own life, right. Because what a bad day to you is not the same as a bad day to another person.

Luke details how prison work impacted his ability to relate to others, and attributes these challenges to the overwhelming differences between CO work and ‘normal’ occupations. The volatility of prison work led many participants to describe friends’ and partners’ concerns as trivial compared to what they experienced: ‘The reality of your life day to day will sometimes just make them [other people] look and feel completely insignificant in comparison. Then you don’t intend to do that but the facts of what your respective lives are will drive a wedge between you’ (Luke). COs drew narratives explaining how these perceptions limited their friendship and relationship circles to other law enforcement personnel, suggesting that differences between their work and ‘normal’ daily struggles drove wedges between them and friends who did not, or could not, understand. Such factors also directly impacted how COs related to loved ones:

Samuel: You come in, you do the job to the best of your ability, and you leave it there. ‘Cause going home is like the biggest thing. My wife is like, ‘So did anything happen at work?’ And I used to tell her all the stories of stuff that’d gone on, and I was just like—Why? Why do I want to put that on you? Why do I want to share that stuff?

Samuel’s efforts to separate his work from his family life impacted his ability to share any difficulties he experienced. COs described censoring what they told loved ones about prison work to shield them from the complex reality of the job. Participants took steps to keep family and friends in the dark about what they did, citing depression, stress, and social taint:

Lukas: Well, my wife doesn’t even understand! And that’s hard, to be correctional officers too, because when they try to have relationships outside, they don’t do very well quite often. Because the people they’re with don’t understand the environment they’re in, right? So that’s why they get with each other. I kinda get it why that happens, actually. Because I come home, my wife and I—as if I want to come home and talk about all the negative stuff, right? So instead of how I did, it was—bottle it all up and not let it out, which isn’t healthy either.

As Lukas discusses, COs viewed such actions as a protective action, framing the realities of prison work as something that would cause ‘unnecessary’ relationship stress. He also suggests this is why COs frequently dated each other. However, this also meant that officers told stories about suppressing negative emotions despite long-term psychological costs (Wills et al., 2021). Such actions alienated family and friends: ‘I don’t even feel comfortable talking with people, it’s hard to explain, too. I feel like it’s a big conversation just to even explain what an average day looks like, so yeah, I usually just say it’s kind of like a jail guard but don’t really go into details’ (Cathy).

Isolating work from loved ones meant that COs relied heavily on other officers for social support and described them as the only people who understood what prison work was ‘really’ like. However, this reliance had downsides (Schultz, 2023a, 2023b), as solidarity ensured that officers consistently discussed trauma and mental health through the lens of hypermasculine occupational cultures which expected COs to ‘renegotiate their self-presentation in light of occupational realities that impact their well-being, identity, and agency at work’ (Ricciardelli, 2019: 19). Unsurprisingly, such values meant that COs were reluctant to share vulnerabilities or present anything that other officers might consider ‘weak:’

Cooper: Everyone kind of puts up that front, right. And I guess it’s the culture, right. It’s very difficult to come in as—I’m going to own this, if you’re battling your own demons. If you make that apparent to other people, well then now you’re weak. If they, as soon as you show any soft side to you, that you might be human, well now you’re weak.

Cooper identified the significant pressure COs faced to be ‘tough’, something reinforced by officers who embodied and reinforced cultural attitudes (Waddington, 1999). Officers who discussed personal struggles or who did not conform to the hypermasculine ‘us versus them’ ideals of CO culture (Schoenfeld and Everly, 2023) described facing criticism from colleagues, adding strain to an already tumultuous work environment.

This was particularly the case when it came to discussions around mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which officers perceived as making them look weak:

Tina: Mental health within law enforcement is still very hushed. It’s not really something that a lot of people will admit to. I mean, it’s different with certain people in different areas, but if you have a situation where someone dies on you or you have to give CPR or this and this happens and you are struggling with it, you’re not gonna get help. And these people are gonna come to work the next day, and if it is that bad then their situation is going to deteriorate and it’s still one of those things that you don’t really talk about. It’s the whole ‘If you can’t stand the fire, get out of the kitchen’ kind of mentality.

The pressures of CO cultural values meant that officers usually dealt with mental health struggles silently, something Tina ascribes to the stigmatized nature of mental health. Even though officers suggested that prison work caused toxic stress levels (Carleton et al., 2018), cultural pressures implicitly discouraged COs from seeking mental health help, seeing it as a violation of hypermasculine toughness codes that stood at the centre of officer values. Paralleling the experiences of institutionalization in incarcerated people, COs found safety in ‘social invisibility’ (Haney, 2003: 42). However, in finding this safety, participants described ‘retreat[ing] deeply into themselves,

trust[ing] virtually no one, and adjust[ing] to prison stress by leading isolated lives of quiet desperation' (Haney, 2003: 43).

In their narratives, COs described institutionalization processes as a 'normal' feature of their work, something they perceived themselves as having no choice except to embrace. Participants articulated their professed inability to discuss mental health struggles with loved ones or coworkers as a uniquely harmful consequence of prison work. Cooper described himself as wearing 'several masks in a day', putting on a 'tough exterior mask' to get through each shift. Elizabeth elaborated on this: 'We all come in and it's this tough stuff, nothing can touch me. Nothing bothers me. But yet a lot of us go home and I think a lot of us struggle'. COs like Cooper and Elizabeth felt pressured to put on brave faces despite facing mental health challenges, something Victor also shared: 'There's other people who don't even talk about it. There's incidents that affect people, and they got to try and put on a strong face'. Since CO culture discourages overt displays of weakness, participants described turning to other coping methods in place of seeking help:

Elizabeth: We don't talk about how we feel. We don't talk about what's going on. So, a lot of people that have, like there's a lot of alcoholics, a lot of guys on steroids, a lot of mental health stuff. To different extents, right, but we don't ever talk about [it].

As Elizabeth demonstrates, officers internalized the values of prison work, something they described as a harmful experience impacting their health and wellness. Even though most officers were aware of CO mental health struggles, many described dealing with work-related tensions through alcohol and self-medication (Schultz, 2022), as the strength of social taint and occupational cultures meant that COs placed greater weight on not breaking 'toughness' codes than they did on prioritizing help-seeking behaviours (Wills et al., 2021).

## Discussion

COs described prison work and institutional socialization as having a wide range of harmful consequences on their lives. Participants crafted narratives of social taint and intrusive latent social identities, and suggested that the pressures of their work negatively reshaped relationships with people outside of the prison environment. The similarities between these narratives and the experiences of previously incarcerated people re-entering the community are striking. Like previously incarcerated people, COs identify social withdrawal and isolation, psychological distancing, hypervigilance, and distrust as factors preventing them from participating in 'normal' society (Haney, 2003, 2012). Such findings suggest that COs may experience their own forms of prisonization, something supported by how closely the themes of this article reflect research with previously incarcerated people (Martin, 2018).

When analyzing their work, our participants drew narratives that suggested the 'incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture' was an extremely harmful aspect of prison work on their lives (Haney, 2003: 9). This description both contrasts and complements the prisonization experiences of incarcerated people. Since incarcerated people are deprived of their liberty and confined to prison, they experience the pains of imprisonment on a continuous basis, and their adaptive responses are consistently reinforced as a result (Crewe, 2011b). As Haney notes, 'the longer prisoners remain in an institution, the more likely it is that the process will significantly transform them' (2003: 39). Yet despite the 'voluntary' nature of prison work and leaving prison at the end of each workday, COs describe deeply and consistently embodying the characteristics of prison work, thereby ensuring

that prison values and personality adaptations routinely influence their day-to-day lives (Higgins et al., 2023; Ricciardelli, 2019).

COs describe ‘develop[ing] an unrevealing and impenetrable “prison mask” and, in some cases, ‘withdraw[ing] from authentic social interactions altogether’ (Haney, 2003: 42). Officers across these data draw narratives outlining efforts to hide their mental health struggles, both to protect loved ones from the realities of their work and from colleagues’ feared judgment for failing to ‘live up’ to the CO standard (Higgins et al., 2023; Martin, 2018). Such tensions limit their ability to relate to others, weakening social networks outside of the CO cadre (Garrihy, 2022). As a result, officers perceived few feasible options for addressing the stress and mental health concerns they experienced. Instead, COs described suppressing and trying to deal with the harmful impacts of prison work on their own.

These decisions distinctively shape COs’ lives beyond the scope of their work. Participants narrated how institutional processes changed their *habitus*, detailing shifts in how they perceived friends, other people, and the world more broadly, and suggesting that their outlooks became exclusively negative (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Higgins et al., 2023). Consequently, officers described ‘losing’ the ability to fairly judge the motives and intentions of others. In officer Tina’s words, COs discussed seeing ‘all the negative, all the bad, all the time’, something that limited their ability to meet people, develop friendships, and maintain healthy relationships with family members. Garrihy’s research provides additional insight into this process. Prison work necessitates COs to behave in certain ways, but when this behaviour carries over into their non-occupational lives, officers view themselves as being psychologically tainted (Garrihy, 2022). This taint has distinctly negative impacts on how COs view themselves, contributing to both individual and interpersonal conflict (Garrihy, 2022). Likewise, Eriksson’s (2023) concept of selective social comparison provides an illustration of how COs respond to psychological dirt associated with prison work. The use of selective social comparison contributes to harmful interpersonal dynamics within and between groups (Eriksson, 2023), something many of our participants identify as a feature of their work. Some officers placed techniques of acting ‘crazy’ or ‘intimidating’ as superior and ridiculed COs unwilling to make these changes as ‘weak.’ Participants like Carrie and Ethan took pride in these strategies, but most of our participants described harmful and unintended consequences emerging from the internalization of such attitudes. Reflecting experiences of institutionalization in formerly incarcerated people, COs deeply internalized the processes of selective social comparison, contributing to negative dispositional shifts and setting beliefs that nobody could possibly relate to their experiences (Haney, 2003). Unsurprisingly, our findings suggest that the use of taint management strategies had lasting impacts on COs’ ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with family members and friends (Eriksson, 2023; Garrihy, 2022).

CO mental health literature demonstrates a clear link between prison work and negative health outcomes in COs (Carleton et al., 2018; Frost and Monteiro, 2020; Wills et al., 2021), and suggests that perceived threats of violence inside the prison contribute to feelings of anxiety for officers and the fear of victimization (Schultz, 2022, 2023b). The consequences of these perceptions extend beyond the concern for one’s physical safety, as Frost and Monteiro suggest that vicarious trauma impacts CO suicides (2020: 1288). COs are frequently involved in or witness traumatic violence, including physical assault, self-harm, and attempted or completed suicides (Frost and Monteiro, 2020). These traumatic events have lasting impacts on officers’ mental health, including the development of PTSD and other mental illnesses (Carleton et al., 2018). However, our participants suggest that officers who speak up about their mental health struggles may be perceived as weak, something that threatens both relationships with other officers and career hopes (Frost and Monteiro, 2020: 1292).

Within these data, COs emphasized the importance of reputation, holding the perceptions of colleagues in high regard (Frost and Monteiro, 2020; Waddington, 1999). Such considerations impact how COs deal with individual challenges. Our participants describe CO mental health as a significant consequence of prison work but consider the potential label of ‘weakness’ to be of greater concern when shaping how they respond to stress. As this implies, the topic of mental health remains heavily stigmatized among COs, with Wills et al. (2021) identifying both cultural and structural barriers that impede officers’ willingness to seek help. COs describe expectations to ‘suppress feelings of mental distress’ or risk being perceived as weak and experience judgment and harassment from other officers (Wills et al., 2021: 431). Our participants felt tacit pressures to stay silent, put on a brave face, and conform to the hypermasculine expectations of CO culture (Lerman, 2013). This remained true beyond the prison walls, with many participants reporting that they prefer to leave discussions *about work at work*, even when they simultaneously described work as a damaging and even traumatizing experience that they struggled to deal with mentally and emotionally.

COs also described using occupational culture to address the violence they witnessed. While cultural solidarity was an effective means of reducing fears of vulnerability (Schultz, 2022; 2023a; 2023b), these perspectives negatively shaped COs’ behaviour outside of prison. Our participants suggested that the harm associated with officers’ occupational responses went far beyond the prisons, and contributed to COs’ latent social identity. Higgins et al.’s concept of identity scars provides a conceptualization of this process, as ‘identity scars displayed how prison work has left indelible marks that have changed the individuals’ sense of self to be in alignment with one’s occupational identity’ (2022: 445). Such processes also highlight how the broader social narratives of institutionalization shaped individual perspectives, as institutionalization served as a significant feature of the social frames shaping how COs embodied officer subcultures (Haggerty and Bucierius, 2021; Higgins et al., 2023).

Our participants considered the operative responses of CO culture as serving a protective purpose in their work (Chenault and Collins, 2019; Garrihy, 2022). However, COs described these responses as carrying over to their non-occupational lives, creating a figurative scar left behind from the experience of prison work. Building on Higgins et al.’s (2022: 445) concept, we consider these ‘identity scars’ to be the harmful aspects of CO culture that, through institutionalization, develop into a latent social identity. Our participants spoke about multiple contexts and situations in which their latent social identity guided their actions in their personal lives. Included in this were low- and high-stakes situations, ranging from going through doors in shopping malls and eating in restaurants to routine narratives of relationship breakdowns and disguising mental health struggles from family and romantic partners. Garrihy (2022: 988) outlines the implications of using ‘psychosocial practices’ associated with prison work in non-occupational contexts and emphasizes the unconscious performance of these practices. Garrihy suggests that COs’ unintended violation of societal norms may result in ‘psychological spoilage’ for officers, which is ‘perceived as degrading to human dignity’ (2022: 989). The institutionalization framework serves as a lens to help understand the consequences of this process. As Haney remarks, the process of adapting to imprisonment ‘creates habits of thinking and acting that are extremely dysfunctional outside the prison walls’ (2003: 37). Our findings demonstrate that the negative features of prison work develop as an unintended consequence of COs’ adaptation to prison work and subcultures, and ‘close off’ other career opportunities.

These findings are more broadly consistent with an organization under stress, characterized by emotional numbing on one end and volatility on another (Bloom, 2004; Crawley, 2004). To phrase

this differently, stress in corrections is not only apparent at the individual level, but also reflects the larger organization. ‘Emotional numbing’ results in the suppression of emotional expression (Bloom, 2004: 215), as COs are under immense pressure to suppress or hide their emotions and conform to the hypermasculine ideals present in the correctional culture (Ricciardelli, 2019; Schultz, 2022; Wills et al., 2021). As a result, COs are resocialized to perceive any ‘feminine’ emotions as negative and instead frame them to a more culturally appropriate response, or hide them altogether (Ricciardelli, 2019). Our participants frequently turn to emotional suppression, hiding their struggles from family, friends, and peers.

Our analysis offers some explanations as to the specific facets of prison work and culture that COs describe as harmful, including mental health, identity, and overall disposition. These themes also create several policy implications. To reduce the impacts of institutionalization on COs, we believe administration should consider prisonization processes when addressing the mental health of their employees. In recent decades, administrators have successfully centred institutionalization when designing prison policies for incarcerated people (Government of Canada, 2019). Keeping institutionalization at the forefront when designing mental health programmes for COs may prove equally productive. Decision-makers may want to consider the root causes of harm shaping CO subcultures, as our data provide insight into the far-reaching impacts of subculture on officers’ lives outside work. Some parts of the CO subculture actively require intervention, as they appear to be harming officers, rehabilitative goals, and prison operations more broadly (Schultz, 2023a, 2023b). Prison administration should take steps to encourage help-seeking in COs, such as mandating mental health counselling after traumatic workplace events, providing external and anonymous mental health resources, and raising a larger awareness of the mental health impacts of prison work. However, we stress that independence and anonymity in this process are crucial due to the subcultural pressures of prison work.

Our analysis has limitations. Our data are not longitudinal, meaning that we rely on officer narratives of change. Narrative analysis serves as an appropriate lens to present our participants’ perceptions of interpersonal change, as ‘the stories people tell are tools used in the everyday work on the self they engage in as part of their encounters with other people’ (Ugelvik, 2015: 28). With that said, a longitudinal examination of CO institutionalization is an obvious next step in detailing the impacts of prison work over time. Likewise, research in other national settings may reveal nuances in terms of how COs respond to institutional pressures. Finally, we have primarily focused on highlighting the utility of institutionalization as a means for understanding CO behaviour, meaning there is significant room for deeper analysis of specific aspects of CO institutionalization. For instance, future research should consider the impacts of CO institutionalization on day-to-day prison operations more broadly, as research has hinted at how COs may resist policy implementation (Schultz, 2023b). In addition, these data suggest an overlap between CO mental health, officer subcultures, and institutionalization processes, something we believe is an obvious area for further investigation. Given how closely our findings reflect other data on CO mental health (Carleton et al., 2018; Wills et al., 2021), we believe there is significant room for more work on the subject.

## Conclusion

We use Haney’s account of institutionalization as an analytical lens to understand CO narratives of mental health and social processes and accomplish two things in doing so. First, we argue that researchers can productively use institutionalization and prisonization frameworks to analyze CO actions, thereby providing new insight into how officers relate to their work and the world

around them. Second, we identify some of the harmful consequences Canadian COs associate with work-related institutionalization. The impacts we describe are features of prison work that directly influence the socialization of individual officers, thereby contributing to impacts on their dispositions and posing a significant threat to their short and long-term mental health. Likewise, such processes contribute to the persistence of harmful behaviours and negative work cultures (Schoenfeld and Everly, 2023). The detrimental effects of prison work continue to burden prison staff with an elevated risk of PTSD and suicide (Carleton et al., 2018), and the negative shroud of correctional subculture contributes to the justification of abuse and violence toward those facing incarceration (Higgins et al., 2022). Understanding these things as features of institutionalization provides new means of addressing them going forward.

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### Notes

1. We follow Haney in using these terms interchangeably.
2. University of Alberta Research Ethics Board approval Pro00061614.
3. Including this article's second author.

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