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Investigating Threat Perception Among Correctional Officers in the Canadian Provincial Correctional System

Abstract This paper presents findings regarding the perception and experience of threat among correctional officers in the Canadian provincial correctional system. Men employed in provincial remand centers or corrections institutions in diverse provinces across Canada, who interact daily with prisoners, voluntarily participated in detailed 60- to 180-minute in-depth interviews. Analysis of interview transcripts reveals that violence is prevalent and men either experience or anticipate experiencing physical or verbal victimization at work. Additionally, officers employ strategies, such as a confident and authoritative self-presentation, building positive relationships with colleagues, and respectful relationships with prisoners, to mitigate this threat. However, we found that threat to safety extended beyond simply those of physical or verbal victimization to include threat to men's sense of self. Specifically, victimization and violence or their threat shape officer's self-concept over time; the ways officers interact within their prison work environment creates a shift in their self that extends beyond the prison walls.

Keywords Prison; Violence; Sense of Self; Corrections Officer; Static Self; Interaction

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In Canada, there is considerable research interest in federal prisons, where offenders are incarcerated for two years or more (Griffiths 2010), explicitly in the relationships among prisoners and those between prisoners and correctional officers. Following from Sykes' classic study (1958), researchers have established the importance of an inmate code that enforces conduct rules, such as not "ratting" on fellow prisoners, distrusting prison officials, and doing "your own time" (Sykes and Messinger 1960; Irwin and Cressey 1962; Ricciardelli forthcoming). Griffiths (2010) maintains that a code of behavior also shapes correctional officers' interactions with colleagues. This "code" places a premium on officers protecting other officers in danger, refraining from becoming friends or too friendly with prisoners, and never talking behind the backs of colleagues. Larivière (2002) found officers' negative attitudes towards prisoners, such as the view that prisoners have too much power, were largely attributable to problematic policies that undermine their authority and escalate their potential to experience violence in interactions with prisoners. Samak (2003) investigated the relationship between working conditions and health, safety, and general well-being for correctional officers employed in the Canadian federal prison system. He found that levels of harassment for officers were "alarmingly" high and the stress of working in the federal prisons "spilled-over" into their private lives (Samak 2003).

Harassment may intensify with prisoners who have more idle hands and idle time. A growing possibility given that there is an increasing trend toward the removal of all or most rehabilitative resources and work programming¹ across

¹ This national campaign referenced draws attention to closure of work-programs in federal prisons in Ontario (Canadian Unitarians for Socail Justice 2010).

all federal prisons (Correctional Service Canada 2008; see also the Canadian Unitarians for Socail Justice 2010 for overviews of cuts to institutional programs and funds). This trend is already well established in most provincial systems across the country. This, combined with recent changes at the policy level, has the potential to further escalate violent prisoner and officer relationships within all prison systems (i.e., federal and provincial). For example, the passing of Bill C-10 will lead to more overcrowding in federal prisons due to offenders being mandated to serve longer sentences and criminal law being less tolerant of "second chances." However, at the provincial level, we can anticipate more individuals being charged with crimes *and* serving more time in remand custody (i.e., time served in provincial remand facilities while awaiting trial, even when an offender is facing a federal sentence) due to the extensive backlog of cases/offenders awaiting trial. Indeed, the Toronto Chief of Police, William Blair, noted that "over 65% of people in custody have not had a trial" (Speech given at the 50th Anniversary of the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto, November 21, 2012).

There is limited scholarship, however, on the provincial governments' role in the Canadian criminal justice system, particularly on male prisoners' experiences in remand centers (pending trial or sentencing) or of being incarcerated for two years less a day in provincial correctional institutions (Motiuk and Serin 2001; Griffiths 2010).² There are some notable exceptions. Comack's (2008) illuminative qualitative study of incarcerated Aboriginal men revealed that cultures of masculinity inside and outside of

² Federal, provincial, and territorial governments in Canada share the responsibility of managing custodial and non-custodial sentences (Motiuk and Serin 2001).

prison facilitated the gendered violence for which they were criminalized. While Weinrath's (2009) survey of men in remand custody presented their views on the increased use of pre-trial detention, as well as the two-for-one value of time served at the time (i.e., until February 22, 2010, each day an offender served in custody pre-trial was counted as double; thus, a person sentenced to six months in prison who had served three months in remand would have served their sentence before ever being to court). Most commonly, he found that prisoners felt the length of remand time was increasing because extensive amounts of time passed before cases went to trial due to insufficient resources in the court system.^{3,4} Looking at provincial offenders from a different angle, Boyd (2011) surveyed 200 correctional officers working in provincial institutions in British Columbia to explore their experiences and perceptions of violent incidents.

With the exception of Boyd (2011), however, we are not aware of any research that focuses on correctional officers' experiences and perceptions of threat in provincial remand centers or correctional institutions. Such research is important for several reasons, including that there has been a large increase in the number of men awaiting sentencing in provincial remand centers and these men out-

number those actually sentenced and in provincial custody (Weinrath 2009). The John Howard Society highlights the problematic conditions of remand in Ontario, such as 12-hour lock-down during day-time hours, inadequate exercise or work opportunities, and lack of access to educational opportunities (e.g., teachers and libraries). Overcrowding, indicated by the double or triple bunking of prisoners in cells and a high prisoner to officer ratio, is commonplace across Canada with most provincial institutions not large enough to accommodate the number of prisoners. Men are sentenced to provincial institutions for a diverse range of offenses, including failure to pay child support, theft, minor drug offenses, and assault. However, in some remand centers men sentenced to provincial prisons and those still in remand are mixed (e.g., prisoners are not divided based on if they are sentenced or not, rather they are divided by security needs); thus, men charged with murder can live alongside men who failed to pay their parking tickets. As well, officers are inhibited in providing rehabilitative programming by the length and diversity of men's sentences and the high turnover in the prisoner populations (see also Griffiths 2010). In both settings officers must work with repeat offenders, who may interact with different prisoners upon each sentence served, creating both friends and enemies and potentially perpetuating gang activity.

Beyond prison-to-prisoner dynamics, officers additionally manage the personal trials and tribulations offenders face as they await trial. These offenders are possibly anxious about their future, concerned about what is happening to their possessions and family, and angry with their situation. Officers must also work with men experiencing addiction and who undergo detox during

their arrival in jail. Moreover, officers are exposed to possibly violent behaviors from offenders post-detox. Remand and provincial correctional institutions, by nature of these characteristics, facilitate a prisoner culture that is hardly solidified and perhaps more in a state of flux than that found in federal prisons. Daily interactions amongst prisoners who have their own unique criminal perspectives and tendencies and personal/psychological health and well-being, combined with the administrative controls that shape these interactions, create a fertile environment for violence (see Trammell 2012; Ricciardelli forthcoming) – one correctional officers must constantly navigate. In fact, the long history of correctional officers being victimized in provincial institutions is made evident in the media (see the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Corrections 2012). Correctional officers serve the function of protecting the public from offenders and/or protecting offenders from each other, but face the possibility of first- or second-hand violence every day: violence directed at themselves or offender violence that they must disrupt through containment tactics, including force.

Our aim in this paper is to highlight officers' experiences in the provincial correctional system. We draw on qualitative interviews with 41 current or retired male correctional officers who worked in provincial remand or correctional institutions of maximum-security classification for male offenders in multiple Canadian provinces. Our interests lie within male officers' perceptions and experiences of threat and how this connects to and shapes their self-concepts in their role as correctional officers. The workplaces of correctional officers, the prisons, are viewed as social structures with fixed settings and predetermined roles. However, we additionally understand

officers as having agency to adjust their roles within these settings; thereby, transforming their identities in the process (see also Stets and Burke 2003). In this regard, how "self as officer" implicates the daily lives of correctional officers outside of the workplace will also be investigated. The shift work of correctional officers, their "code" of conduct, their own "institutionalization" within the centers where they work (e.g., they are locked "in"), and their perception of constant actual or potential threat are factors which potentially make this sense of self the most salient across multiple settings. To this end, four questions directed this research:

Q1. How do provincial correctional officers perceive the prison environment?

Q2. How and what types of threat do officers' experience on the job?

Q3. How do officers maintain their safety at work?

Q4. How does this threat affect their sense of self?

The paper is organized such that we begin, first, with a review of the literature relevant to our research objective. Since little exists on our specific topic, we draw heavily on Canadian scholarship on federal prisons and American research on state prisons or county jails to illustrate what the correctional officer role entails and how its performance can change a person (e.g., their health and well-being). Second, we introduce our theoretical framework, situated within the interpretative paradigm, as one that enables an understanding of how self can be perceived as changing in response to threat. We then review the methods and present the findings. The analyses of interviewee transcripts reveal that correctional

³ Other reasons for the increase in remand time before 2010, beyond employing the strategy of using remand as long as possible to decrease time served, include zero tolerance policies, increased difficulties in getting bail, lawyering and police conduct, and offender drug use.

⁴ Research ethics approval was obtained and participant confidentiality and anonymity were protected. Participants were able to ask for clarification about the study or procedures. They were also reminded of their ability to withdraw from participating during the interview and that they were not obligated to answer any questions or discuss any topics. They were also informed that, due to the procedures used to ensure anonymity, their data, once transcribed, could not be removed from the study. In this document, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the respondents and the names of the correctional facilities have been removed.

officers, by nature of their work, experience actual and anticipated threats of physical and verbal victimization. But concurrently, they experience “threats to their sense of self.” Their self can be dramatically changed or change can even be stalled in the daily activities of their job, often with a rippling effect on their daily lives outside of the prison. The importance of our research stems from the realization that threats extend beyond the possibility of physical and mental victimization but, instead, are intimately connected to interactional changes in the self.

Background and Literature Review

The Prison Environment and Threats Faced by Officers

Extensive variation exists in prison conditions across the United States, ranging from prisoners having limited access to hot meals, recreational activities, and anything deemed *unessential* (Lenz 2002) to the extreme, and infamous, conditions in the Phoenix jail system under Sheriff Joe Arpaio. In Phoenix, prisoners are limited to two meals a day, forced to wear pink underwear, and temperatures are allowed to rise to over 130 degrees in the summer (Shorey 2003). Existing American research on federally incarcerated prisoners, however, has established a concrete connection between the prison environment and the potential deterioration of correctional officers’ health and well-being, specifically as demonstrated in the work of Bierie (2012). His data showed that prison-level aggregations of harsher conditions, in some cases mandated by policy (Finn 1996), are significantly associated with a marked deterioration in officers’ physical and psychological symptomatology that extends beyond individual-level effects. Such deterioration includes:

reduced well-being, greater alcohol and tobacco use, and concerns about life outside of work (e.g., financial concerns), increasing physical problems (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, back pain), and longer or more frequent sick leaves (Bierie 2012).

In comparison to that of workers in the general population, the work environment of corrections officers in provincial prisons in Quebec, Canada was correlated with high levels of psychological distress (e.g., for corrections staff) and adverse psychosocial factors (Bourbonnais et al. 2005). Specifically, between 2002 and 2004, male and female officers reported experiencing more psychological distress when they were exposed to high psychological demands, when rewards were scarce at work, and they had low autonomy. Other factors impacting distress included experiences of job strain, a lack of social support from supervisors and peers, or feeling either harassed or intimidated at work. Across North America, the federal and provincial penal work environments appear to negatively impact the overall well-being of those employed within the institutions. As a result, some researchers have begun to investigate the high rates of job burn-out, job dissatisfaction, and turnover among correctional officers (Lambert, Hogan, and Tucker 2009; Lambert, Altheimer, and Hogan 2010; Lambert and Paoline 2010).

American research has established that violence in the workplace is a major source of threat to the occupational health of correctional officers (Hayes 1985; Dignam and Fagan 1996; Garcia 2009; Lahm 2009; Sorensen et al. 2011). In prisons, both male and female officers experience harassment, although women more so than men (e.g., Savicki, Cooley, and Gjesvold 2003). Prisoner age and their years of experience on the job (Ditchfield and Harries 1996;

Lahm 2009; Sorensen et al. 2011), as well as prisoner overcrowding (Gaes and McGuire 1985; Martin et al. 2012) have also been documented as relatively accurate predictors of assaults on officers or of prisoners threatening officers. Each year, many correctional officers are victims of physical assault, battery, injury, punctures or stabbings, and verbal assaults (Hayes 1985).

Consistent with American findings, officers in the Canadian correctional system are exposed to the threat of violence, intimidation, and at times are victims of violence on the job. For example, Boyd (2011) reported that provincial correctional officers in British Columbia were prone to “credible threats of harm” from prisoners that included: physical assault, being hit by feces, blood, vomit, urine or spit, and other types of victimization. Moreover, years on the job increased exposure to violent incidents and higher levels of stress. He maintained that transient populations like those in provincial institutions increase the threat and degree of violence in the institution (Boyd 2011). Looking at officers in the federal prison system, Seidman and Williams interviewed 27 officers that had been victims of prison-based hostage takings. Respondents, here, most frequently reported having thoughts of “disbelief, fear of injury and death, and survival” during the incidents, while their emotional reactions exposed feelings of “shock, anxiety, terror, frustration, vulnerability, powerlessness, humiliation, and isolation” (1999:30). The personal impact of these extreme high-threat situations was evident in how these officers became hyper-vigilant on the job, developed sleep disorders, and, as reported by over 50% of the respondents, felt that their personal lives were negatively affected (Seidman and Williams 1999). More recently, Merecz-Kot and Cebryńska

(2008) discovered that violence extends beyond that of prisoners toward officers. Indeed, a third of their participants reported experiencing repetitive aggressive acts from co-workers or their superiors.

The Corrections Officer: Role Conflict

In American research on state prisons, the roles and responsibilities of correctional officers have been linked to interpersonal challenges, such as the balancing of custody and treatment as embodied in the officer role (Blair, Black, and Long 1981; Hemmens and Stohr 2000). Hemmens and Stohr found that male officers, although less so than female, tended more toward a human service orientation (e.g., a responsibility to rehabilitate) rather than the “hack” orientation (e.g., a “hard-line approach to their job and interactions with inmates” [2000:343]). While education and age did not affect preferred orientation among officers, having a prior military background was correlated to the adoption of a hack orientation. Lastly, they found that military veterans, rather than non-veterans, were more likely to endorse the use of force to gain compliance with an order (Hemmens and Stohr 2000). The limited Canadian literature in the area includes Linda Simourd’s (1997) doctoral dissertation, where she investigated correctional officers in the federal prison system. In this quantitative study of front-line staff, she found that many were supportive of the prison’s rehabilitative approach, but were additionally concerned that greater staff corruption or manipulation may be a product of increased interaction with prisoners. Lanthier (2003) also noted the difficulties associated with the combined security, service, and reintegration functions of federal correctional officers in their occupational role. He explained how officers’ conflicting roles

intensify in their opposition and stressfulness due to their low (the lowest) status as a civil servant in the penitentiary hierarchy. Indeed, officers sit just above prisoners and must comply with their tasks as proclaimed in official regulation or are threatened with penalty – including dismissal from their position (Lanthier 2003). Overall, scholars have found that role conflict, the need to punish yet rehabilitate prisoners can be so commonplace among correctional officers (Grusky 1959; Hepburn and Albonetti 1980; Poole and Regoli 1980; Toch and Klofas 1982; Liou 1995) that compliance with one aspect of the role can make compliance with another near impossible (Toch and Klofas 1982).

This role ambiguity and contradiction, combined with different views of what the correctional officer role entails, may lead to officers feeling torn between conflicting self perceptions or even suggest their need to create multiple presentations of self. Indeed, some scholars have noted the “performative” quality of correctional officers’ attitudes when referring to officers who engage in diverse presentations of self and their emotions in their interactions while on duty (Crawley 2004). In this same vein, Guenther and Guenther (1972) explored how officers manage or cope with uncertainties and unpredictability while on the job. Their study revealed that actions (e.g., force and/or assault) used to deal with diverse situations, sometimes threat-based, were in conflict with correctional philosophy.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the work of Stets and Burke (2003) is followed and a structural approach is adopted in our symbolic interactionist interpretation of how violence or the threat of violence in prisoner-

-officer interaction is connected to male officers’ sense of self. From this approach, the self is understood as always acting in a social context. Identities and behaviors, as well as changes therein, are perceived as the product of social structures, particularly interactions within social structures. Stets and Burke (2003) further argue that the opposite is true, that social structures materialize through patterned actions among individuals over time.

In the structural variant of symbolic interaction, the self is understood to be made up of multiple parts or “identities” which are linked to social structures (Stets and Burke 2003). Individuals’ identities inform their roles or relationships within society. Any person can have multiple identities; for example, a male correctional officer may have “self as friend,” “self as father,” “self as officer,” or “self as mentor” as an identity. Moreover, each person can attribute multiple meanings to what these roles entail or mean (i.e., what is known as the content of role identities). A male correctional officer, for example, may perceive his role as that of a “protector,” “enforcer,” or “counselor.” Stryker (1980) argued that one role identity may be played out frequently and across different situations, what he terms a salient identity. The salient role identity emerges when an individual presents this identity in a greater number of interactions with people, who are in turn interacting with this identity and who develop strong ties to the individual (in the capacity he or she is presenting him/herself only). The development of strong ties with others reinforces this identity and enables a positive environment for the individual to continue with its adoption. An identity becomes salient when it is the identity an individual utilizes or embodies most often (e.g., it becomes internalized and understood as a representation of self).

According to Rosenberg (1979), self-concepts include how people think, feel, and imagine who they are, their idealized views and their actual practices of self. People experience negative or positive emotions based on their self-presentation and sense of self, which vary according to how they feel they have met the expectations of a role identity. In light of these emotions, they may change their behavior or alter their conception of the situation. In altering the meanings they attach to a situation or behavior, individuals can change their identities. Identity change and the constant (re-)conceptualization of the self is an ongoing likely outcome of social interactions in larger social structures (Stets and Burke 2003). To this end, we specifically explore how male correctional officers’ experiences of violence or its threat are connected to their sense of self.

Methods

We conducted in-depth interviews with 100 correctional officers previously or currently employed in provincial remand or correctional institutions in various provinces across Canada (e.g., New Brunswick, Ontario, Alberta, Nunavut, Prince Edward Island)⁵ between October 2011 and December 2012. A demographic survey, tracking places of employment, age, marital status, and field notes (where

⁵ Additionally, there is little research on women’s experiences serving sentences in provincial correctional institutions. Exceptions include Buchanan and colleagues’ (2011) participatory action research with women incarcerated in a provincial prison in Western Canada for drug and alcohol offenses (for 3 months on average) to understand women’s perspectives on their addiction and its relationship to their criminalization. Croteau (2000) and Griffiths, Yule, and Gartner (2011) studied violence among female inmates. Notably, Croteau (2000) found that provincially incarcerated women experienced psychological abuse and institutionalized violence alongside physical assault. Griffiths and colleagues’ study outlines how trivial issues can escalate into violent altercations among women incarcerated in a provincial institution in Ontario.

possible), was also collected. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to meet these officers. In practice, this meant that word of mouth recruitment in the community or through supportive provincial ministries was used to find officers who were interested in voluntarily participating in interviews. For the purpose of this investigation, the data analyzed was limited to male respondents, currently or previously employed as correctional officers, who had worked with adult males in provincial correctional institutions or remand centers that held maximum-security prisoners.

This was the specific focus for a variety of reasons. First, each prisoner population (e.g., adult males or females, youth males or females) differs in their behaviors and needs, as well as the policies surrounding their custody arrangement (e.g., women and youth cannot be double bunked in many institutions while men can be triple bunked if necessary); thus, officers’ behaviors may change in accordance. Second, prisoner behaviors, as well as the role and expectations of officers, may change based on the security classification of the prison in which they are employed (e.g., the offenders have more restrictions and supervision in maximum-security). Given remand centers are only housed in maximum-security facilities (e.g., experiences of remand officers and those in less secure prisons cannot be reliably combined) our sample is restricted to men working in maximum-secure or remand facilities. Lastly, female correctional officers were not included in the sample because, given fewer women work in direct contact with prisoners in adult male facilities in comparison to men, too few women were interviewed who worked in this capacity to successfully compare experiences by gender, or at least to do so without potentially

breaching the confidentiality or anonymity of our female participants to date. Thus, 41 was the total number of interviews analyzed for this paper.

Respondents' years of work as correctional officers ranged from approximately two to 27. All men included in the sample had worked with adult males in maximum-security facilities; 36 were currently employed as correctional officers. Aside from working or previously working in maximum-security provincial remand or prisons, ten of the respondents had experiences with other prisoner populations (i.e., youths and females) or adult male offenders serving time in less secure facilities. A few also had some experience in federal corrections and 31 of the men had previous employment experience outside of corrections. Interestingly, all participants self-identified as White and Canadian and most had a college diploma (n=30) followed by a university degree (n=11). The minimum education of the sample was a high school diploma (n=3). In terms of religiosity, 13 men identified as practicing their faith, 16 as non-practicing, and 9 men determined any sort of religious affiliation to be non-applicable to their distinctiveness. The ages of respondents ranged from 22 to over 65; the average age of respondents was 35 years old (although data on age was missing for two men). 21 of the men interviewed had at least one child. Interestingly, 16 men reported a change in their marital status since they first started in corrections (recall some men had a few years of experience and were in their early twenties when interviewed). Nonetheless, 4 men were divorced (at least once) and remarried, 14 were currently married, 15 were single/never married, and 8 lived in a common-law relationship.

We used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct our interviews in person or by telephone.⁶ Of these interviews, 37 were conducted in person and only four were done by phone. Each interview lasted up to three hours in length, depending on a variety of factors including their multitude of experiences and general talkativeness. The interview guide contained open-ended items covering an array of topics related to the experiences of correctional officers in the prison environment. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the interviewer flexibility to probe any conversational paths and topics as they emerged. Once respondents were comfortable discussing their experiences, the interview followed the conversational path of the respondent with probing when particular topics of interest arose. The in-depth interviews permitted a deeper understanding of the specific reality as experienced by respondents to be grasped.

Interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim.⁷ The interviews were coded thematically. We used a coding strategy that has some comparability with that which is used in a modified grounded theory drawing from Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Glaser and Strauss (1967).⁸ This strategy ensured a rigorous process of data analysis was undertaken that, systematically,

⁶ The few phone interviews were due to the extensive distance between where the officers and researchers resided. We found no discernible difference between the in-person and phone based interviews.

⁷ Any direct verbal quotes from participants have been edited for speech fillers such as "like", "umm", and "ahh", and grammar in order to assist with comprehensibility and flow. Although, to stay true to the voice of the respondents, transcriptions were verbatim and any edits were minimal and did not affect the participant's vernacular, use of profanity, or slang.

⁸ We make no claims that we completed a grounded theory research project, for example, generating theory. Instead, we adopt a coding strategy that is informed by some procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

encouraged conceptual themes to emerge directly from the data. The premise behind this process was founded on that first put forth by Glasser and Strauss who suggested researcher's "use *any* materials bearing on his area that he can discover" (1967:169). Specifically, our data analysis employed a constructed grounded theory approach that was driven by the data but also attentive to existing theory (Charmaz 2006). In this sense, we approached the data with our knowledge about the research questions suspended and allowed themes to emerge from the data. To this end, our analytic strategy was as follows. Upon reading the interview transcripts, we first assigned codes (similar to Strauss and Corbin's open codes) to the data that seemed to capture the different ways officers spoke about their experiences, for example, "being there for me" and "quick code response time." Our next step was to reflect upon how officers' responses had shared dimensions, patterns, or relationships, what we perceived as central organizing themes (similar to Strauss and Corbin's axial coding). For example, we perceived the codes "being there for me" and "quick code response time" to coalesce into the larger theme "Do you got my back?" Central themes were composed of multiple respondents describing similar experiences, views, and feelings regarding a particular topic. Specifically, major re-current themes that emerged across all or some participants' narratives were determined. Figure 1 is an example of how we conceptually and theoretically used our findings in answer to our research questions (see Appendix A); space limitations do not permit us to provide a figure for each research question. Figure 1 depicts how we understand certain factors (shared in interviews) as linked to perceptions of threat by correctional officers (Q1), which we discuss in our findings section.

Both authors reviewed the transcripts and ensured agreement was achieved regarding all codes and emergent themes noted in the data (e.g., a qualitative understanding of inter-rater reliability). Below, these themes are explored, first, by reviewing how officers perceive their environment and the threats they experience and, second, how they mitigate these threats. Throughout, we direct our analysis to how violence or its threat shapes their sense of self.

Officers in the Provincial Correctional System

Perception of Actual or Anticipated Threat (Q1; Q2)

The theme *violence is expected* captures how participants described threats as multifaceted and largely attributable to diverse elements unique to the prison environment. We must recall that correctional officers, even when instructed to be peace officers, are trained in the use of force tactics; therefore, they are primed to anticipate violence when interacting with prisoners. The presence of violence or its threat while on duty was described by all correctional officers working with adult males as commonplace. It was viewed as a natural part of the prison work environment. For example, Jackson, an active officer, explained that he feels the potential for physical violence "a hundred percent" of the time. While Nate, a retired officer, described:

Being assaulted and attacked. To me it was part of my job... Some were fighting hard, you end up with a brawl. They're punching, kicking, biting, and spitting, and everything like this... [Sometimes] you [have to] give it to them just as much as they give to you... It just happens. Sometimes you open the door and the inmate just sucks your face, nailed ya. You just don't know.

Officers with decades of experiences noted that violence and its threat remained customary even though correctional officer conduct had changed over the last 15 to 30 years. These men explained that when they started in corrections the culture perpetuated violence by abusing or mistreating the prisoners. For example:

Once my partner came out of the unit, I called him out. I said "Let's go get the mops." And back in the day when I first started in the business that was one of those code words. If an inmate said [anything to us] he was going to get the mops. We'd take him to the mop room. Out of sight, out of mind. He might get a beating on him. (Patrick)

He, echoing others, noted that although the culture had changed – the focus was now on peace rather than conflict – and it was no longer acceptable for officers to engage in acts of physical violence with prisoners (e.g., "inmates are getting killed and our mandate, it says in our policy: care, custody, and control, in that order we are responsible for their safety and you can be held accountable" [Buddy]), physical violence continued regularly and the sense of threat was omnipresent. Other officers, like Steve, described incidents where they were attacked by prisoners: "When I got assaulted, one of the times I had to get taken out in a stretcher and [the prisoners] saw... You'd think they'd killed me they were all cheering as I was being taken out on the stretcher..." Nonetheless, respondents explained that if they retaliated and were caught inflicting physical harm on a prisoner, the current climate would ensure the officer was suspended (with or without pay) or terminated.

Officers viewed several factors as underlying the violent and resulting high threat prison environ-

ment. These factors included high prisoner to officer ratios, a lack of co-worker cohesion, being assigned to dangerous units, and confrontations with particularly dangerous prisoners. The high prisoner to officer ratio (e.g., two officers on a range with 16 prisoners double bunked or two officers on a range with over 60 double bunked prisoners) that was intensified by overcrowding in prisons (e.g., two officers on a range with 24 prisoners triple bunked; two in the beds and one on the floor on a mattress) where prisoners vastly outnumbered correctional officers was commonly mentioned as a contributing factor to experiencing not only the threat of violence but actual physical attacks as well. Cells in many prisons contain one bunk bed and are approximately six by nine feet in size. Prisoners could be locked into their cell for 16 hours on a standard day, more time if the jail was in lockdown. The extent of overcrowding was described by many:

It really is a brand new challenge every time you come in on duty. The place was fit for fifty-seven inmates and you got to come [into work] with ninety-two [prisoners]. Then the next thing you know, sheriff comes in with three guys... They have to sleep in the gym or phone room, which there's not enough room to put a single mattress on the floor. They gotta spend a whole weekend there. And it's hot in there, it's filthy, it's gross, people spit on the walls and snot and... (Mason)

Not surprising, many respondents described experiencing threat as a result of overcrowding:

Oh, it affected everybody. Everybody was involved in it. When you have, instead of ten, thirty in each area and one officer outside and one officer inside, it's a big difference. Where you got thirty, you've got problems. You have a problem with thirty, not a problem with ten. At times it was [frightening]... I was involved in

riots and stuff, where they refused to come in from the yard and you have to go in, fight them, and bring them back in... (Aaron)

Beyond overcrowding, ranges that housed high profile prisoners or prisoners with particularly violent or aggressive criminal histories were considered particularly dangerous, contributing to this sense of threat. The men on these ranges were viewed as more violent, given the nature of their charges, and perhaps more likely to be victimized because of the dynamics within the group of persons sharing the range (e.g., the types of charges different people held, the notoriety of their crime, the mix of gang or criminal affiliations between the prisoners, etc.). Many officers, retired or actively employed, described their experiences on these ranges, and in doing so revealed how their sense of their role as officer had multiple meanings, with explicit feelings attached to these meanings. The meaning of officer as "protector," "enforcer," or "counselor" included feelings of being "nervous" and "prepared" and "alert." For example, Greyson explained, "I remember being nervous. You always feel you've got to watch over your shoulder and stuff. After a while you still got to be careful because you can't really trust any of them because they are criminals." Others described specific prisoners or situations where a prisoner was more likely to attack an officer: "If you're dealing with an inmate or a guy, that's just very agitated...he doesn't like authority and he'll come up from behind you and pop you in the head or whatever... That's one of their things. The inmates, they don't care. They'll fight you" (Johny).

The theme *Do you got my back?* reflects how, despite much of the violence in prison being attributable to

prisoner interactions, officers associated any lack of solidarity and cohesion among co-workers, sometimes exacerbated by institutional policy, with an increased sense of threat. Solidarity among co-workers promoted safety, collective perceptions of the role of officer as "collegial" or "protector," and decreased threat. All interviewees noted that they preferred working with certain colleagues rather than others (e.g., "it was tough to work with some folks [that] didn't seem to understand how to carry out the job" [Mike]). More so, all officers were most interested in working with a colleague that they felt would offer them protection in a potentially threatening situation. Jake, currently employed as an officer, explained that: "when you're working with somebody, you want to know that somebody backs you up ... I think you pick up a sense from people whether they would be there for you if things get a little rough." This thought process was reiterated by many who described a strong level of solidarity between themselves and some of their co-workers due to their similar backgrounds (e.g., military training, etc.) and strong amicable relationships (e.g., "our shift hangs out all the time" [Victor]).

Most, although not all, officers stated that the safety of their co-workers was first and foremost in importance to them while working. Specifically, the safety of their colleagues was more important than the safety of the prisoners, demands or desire of the administration, and that of the public. The reasoning here was simply that they needed to "protect" each other. Officers had to feel that if they were in danger or threatened, their colleagues would respond. For example, this level of trust was seen as vital especially during *codes*, an alarm indicating an officer was in danger. When asked

about the importance of responding to emergency situations and if they had done so during their careers, many officers explained that they always responded as quickly as possible because even a few seconds passing was enough time for an officer to be hurt, even killed. Officers also reported feeling less safe working in larger facilities because response times would increase simply due to the distance that the emergency response team (ERT) and their other colleagues would need to travel to come to their aid. Although respondents described the importance of responding to these “codes” as paramount, others noted that it is not uncommon for some officers to either not respond to these emergency situations at all or simply just observe them as they unfold rather than intervening and/or providing assistance.

Indeed, respondents explained that while many professed that a “team atmosphere” existed among correctional workers and a “team player” was a central identity attached to the officer role, in reality, this was not always the practice. Many hypothesized that these divisions were due to “gossip,” institutional policies, or other personal frictions between colleagues. For example, officers spend up to 16 hours a day with each other and they have varying personalities, work ethics, ages, and political viewpoints that can impact how well people get along. Some of the policies in place to promote an equal work environment were described as being “used as weapons against each other; which is sad” (Steve). These policies, and the allegations that some officers have made against each other have resulted in distrust among some staff and a lack in confidence in how quickly, or even *if*, a fellow co-worker will respond to an emergency situation (i.e., a *code* being called).

Moreover, some participants explained that they would second-guess their actions during physical altercations with prisoners because they feared institutional investigations and punitive repercussions in response to their behavior. For example, beyond adhering to institutional policy, Carmen explained that:

Inmate dynamics and mentality has changed that now if staff ever so much as flicks them, first thing they’ll do is call the police. If you put on the cuffs and they were struggling and it made a mark on their wrists, they want to call the police and have pictures taken. So, [we] just take extra steps. We have more cameras present [and we] make sure that the camera sees when we do the finger check to show that cuffs are not too tight. When they have to stay in cuffs and shackles for a period of times. We will go back, I think, every 15 to half hour with a camera again to show “cuffs check, still okay.” We need to protect ourselves.

Other officers explained the difficulties associated with how every *use of force* must be followed by an investigation that includes *a use of force assessment* by an independent third party. The necessity of these investigations combined with the punitive measures that could follow (e.g., suspension, job loss) were described as a hindrance to job performance: “It’s ridiculous. We’re afraid to go to codes now; you have to describe why you took him in an arm bar to the ground. Why? It’s hard to articulate that in a report. They’ll [investigators] say it was excessive use of force” (Justin). In the same sense, Jace, like many others, described his anxieties at work after being suspended for using force while trying to prevent a prisoner from committing suicide: “I always have to watch what I’m doing. I feel I suffer from post-traumatic stress... You know, ‘cause I’m always worried... ‘Am I going to get in

trouble for this?’” Unfortunately, all too often officers had experiences “cutting down,” “untying,” or “seeing blood gushing” (Goodwin) from prisoners trying to end their lives, sometimes successfully and other times not. Yet, such concerns about their behaviors when trying to save prisoners’ lives was omnipresent for officers. The quotes illustrative of *Do you got my back?* reveal that solidarity and good relations between co-workers were presented as (although selectively present or absent between peers) an essential and vital element for threat reduction. The potential for lack of assistance or support from colleagues or perceived institutional constraints on behavior appeared to be a major contributing factor to the perception of and actual threat experienced among some officers. Given the wide-ranging potential sources of threat, the question remains, how do correctional officers negotiate their safety?

Negotiating Safety (Q3)

I’m not a bleeding heart is a theme that refers to officers’ presentation of self in a way that, through their body language and physical/verbal assertion of confidence and authority, fosters respect from prisoners and protects them from threat. The respondents perceived prisoners as keenly observant, with ample time on their hands, and unforgiving. Officers felt that prisoners would look for their insecurities and then wait for an opportunity to exploit them; they felt prisoners had endless amount of time to watch, learn, and wait before they acted. Their awareness of prisoners’ perceptiveness prompted them to change their self-presentation, physically or in terms of their personality, in order to garner respect and trust, and have some semblance of control over

prisoners and their personal safety. Many officers explained the importance of presenting themselves as confident, in control, and fair mannered; although not overly sympathetic:

I certainly didn’t want to come across like a bleeding heart social worker, that I’m here to help you every minute of the day...you have to have a presence that is firm but fair and you have to have the wherewithal that when something is not feeling right. People are trying to pull the wool over your eyes, so you learn how to behave ... [If] you go into those settings looking vulnerable...the inmates will pick that up very quickly...so you may be targeted... (Mike)

Respondents also valued appearing neither as overly aggressive nor vulnerable in any way. The idea here was that if an officer presented as too aggressive, he could be viewed as “hiding” his fears or as “scared” rather than someone to be feared. In the same sense, if an officer demonstrated his vulnerability, he could quickly become preyed upon. Steve explained that:

Where they’ll [officers] be confident, the inmates will pick up on that. Or we’ll have some people that aren’t as confident and they have a tough guy act, where they have to be overbearing and they have to kind of throw their weight around more than they should because they’re insecure and you can see that. [The] inmates, they’ll say: “That guy’s walking crazy.” He walks in with “I’ll kill anybody” [a look on his face] they say “Why he is acting like that?” Because he’s scared.

Beyond behavior, physical stature and body image were also important forms of self-presentation. Being physically fit (e.g., muscular), large (e.g., tall), and being perceived as or having a reputation for being a “tough guy” (e.g., strength) assisted in

creating a confident non-vulnerable self-presentation that warranted prisoner respect. Respondents who reported their height as “shorter than average” described making up for their physical height in strength, speed, and muscularity. Some respondents explained they started body building because of their occupation, they described work out routines and diets designed to assist with muscle gain. Some spoke about their disrespect for overweight officers who had “let themselves go” (Drew) and others went so far to as to view these officers as threats to their safety. Clearly, physical stature was considered as important for personal negotiations of safety. It enabled officers to feel they could hold their own and handle or even intimidate the prisoners in their custody; they could possess the “enforcer” correctional officer role. Yet, while valued in one-on-one confrontations and interactions, physical prowess was not relied on by participants when trying to diffuse an altercation among several prisoners – here words were the optimal choice of weapon – because officers explained: “if you’re inside a range with thirty guys that are all grown men... You’re not going to win” (Willie). Some participants did use their physical stature in emergency/violent situations; however, these altercations were “necessary” or with few or a single prisoner. Overall, bodily presentation was not enough in itself to mitigate threat and provide safety.

Another predominant employed strategy geared toward threat reduction was communication and *talking with respect*. Here, participants explained that tactful and non-threatening communication when confronting prisoners in front of their peers was essential to reducing threat. Indeed, many described their “voice” as their most powerful “weapon” when on duty and so understood the identity

of counselor to have some meaning for their correctional officer role. For example, Barry explains: “you need to have good verbal communication for sure when you’re dealing with these guys every day, talking to them every day. You’ve got to be very firm when something needs to be done”.

Talking allowed the prisoners to save face and officers to garner their respect, and, in consequence, maintain their safety (e.g., prevent threat). This is evident in Cole’s description of his preferred “partner”: “...my preference for people to work with is, I don’t care if you’re 6’2” or 5’2”, I still always want to work with people who will prefer to try to de-escalate, to deal with situations verbally, that will respect inmates and treat them as a person because it makes everybody’s life easier. If everybody has respect for the inmates, it is a world easier.” Also, at times, it was easier and more effective to “talk” to a prisoner rather than to use force. Respondents described a culture among prisoners that would force a prisoner to act aggressively toward a correctional officer who they felt was negatively impacting their reputation in front of or among their peers. Thus, words could be needed to “de-escalate” a situation. Participants frequently described the value of respect and trust in general prisoner management and diffusing crisis situations. Jason, for example, explained how his respectful interactions with prisoners ensured his safety during a prison riot:

So, on one afternoon shift there were some, we got a sense that something wasn’t working right. They walked by me and said “Boss get off the floor” and I said “What’s going on?” he said “Just get off the floor,” and so they started rioting and smashing some stuff up...they absolutely beat this guy to a pulp, this correctional officer; [they] didn’t even touch me...

As evident in Jason’s story, the ways in which officers interact with their clients (the prisoners) have extensive implications for their personal safety. Indeed, many officers placed a high value on treating prisoners fairly, consistently, and simply as human beings, which was distinguished from the unacceptable behavior of being their “friend” or a “care-bear.” This strategy produced some sense of safety, or at least more of a sense of safety, than “chirping,” disrespecting, teasing, or taunting the prisoners.

Self in Transition (Q4)

As the above findings and discussion begin to reveal, the high threat environment on the job and after hours appeared to have a personal impact on the sense of self of the correctional officers interviewed. Here, we draw upon themes that specifically illustrate how respondents’ perceptions and experiences of threat impacted their sense of self inside and outside of their paid work. Applying Stets and Burke (2003), it appears that the perception of potential violence within the social context in which officers work, and the roles they took on while interacting in the prisons shaped their sense of self over time; sometimes this resulted in a self that was far removed from the person they were when they first started working in corrections.

Beyond the sense of threat experienced in the prisons, respondents described threats to self that extended beyond the workplace. *Following me home* refers to how the threat of victimization, violent or otherwise, could sometimes follow officers home into their personal lives. All participants described some experience of threat while they were not actively on duty. These experiences

begin to suggest how the correctional officer role, and the feelings and behaviors associated with it, can, for some men, become a salient identity over time. For some officers, threat occurred in confrontations with released former prisoners they encountered in public⁹ or even at their homes after former prisoners or affiliates of current prisoners followed them home. Nate explained a situation where he was out with his family:

We had officers who were getting threatening phone calls at home and stuff like this. [I was with] my wife downtown and [the] kids, and they call me one day. Eventually, we walk into restaurants and I say: “If this happens, you people just run there and I’ll take care of it and call the police.” But, you had to deal with these things and some people couldn’t deal with them and they just quit.

Following our interview with Ben, he abruptly returned home because his partner called and reported seeing someone looking into their home windows and trying to enter the premises. These experiences of threat were particularly worrisome for participants because they affected the safety of their family and loved ones. Many officers even choose not to enter certain establishments in their time off work as a result of their knowledge of and interactions with prisoners. Their fear is that their correctional officer role will replace any other role they may act upon, such as father or husband, should they confront ex-prisoners in a non-institutional setting. Others noted that because they had been “followed before,” they had become more cautious over time. For example, at a public event, John described that he:

⁹ Not all encounters with former inmates are negative or threat-driven.

...ran across a couple inmates that have been in jail at [institution's name]. I'm walking with my wife and my little girl and my father-in-law and my brother-in-law. But, these guys said: "Well, you're not in uniform. We can kick the crap out of you..." I walked with my daughter. I stopped to look, I turned around and they were after me again...all this in front of my two-year-old daughter.

Indeed, the experiences of threat described by participants indicated that they did not "leave their work at work" (Larry).

The majority of respondents, but not all interviewees, commonly described *becoming harder* over the course of their employment in corrections. While the degree varied by respondent, officers perceived their previously more sympathetic, empathetic, or emotional self was replaced, at some point, with a hardened self; essentially, for some officers, their role as "counselor" was increasingly replaced with a role of "enforcer." Derek explained how he had changed when working as a corrections officer: "I think the jail is the formula to change most people's values and I don't think it's much different from being a cop actually. In the sense you become harder. You become maybe a little less sensitive to others 'cause you're a little less compassionate." Many correctional officers also felt they were less respected than police officers. They expressed feeling they had little respect at all from society in their occupation – recognizing that more often than not they too were hidden away from mainstream society in jails where they associated with individuals that society had deemed unfit to live in the community.

Nate noted that his "harder" self largely emerged as a form of protection: "You become a lot tougher,

less caring, your attitude changes, and it has something to do with your everyday expectations. It's not the same. You just don't care after a while." Beyond more noticeable changes in self, the overwhelming majority of respondents spoke of their work self or correctional officer self. Indeed, people too often fail to recognize gradual changes in self or even personality until extensive time has passed and the change becomes more pronounced. This work self was predominantly described as "tough" and "hard," it entailed displays of confidence and aggression, minimal humor and the creation of a "wall" when in the presence of prisoners. For some respondents, this self "came out" as they neared the jail:

I went to work one day and I was driving in with this friend of mine. I was living with him actually...he says: "I've gotta say something," we laugh and joke from [a city] to the west end of [another city] every day. And the minute you hit the drive way, you stop laughing, your face turns like stone and we go into the jail. And I said: "I don't know, I always did that." It was like I turned a different person on when I went inside the jail 'cause I felt I had to... [I got] caught up in the whole lifestyle, and thought that I had to be this mean, tough son-of-a-bitch walking into the jail. I had that look on my face like: "Don't mess with me or else." (Mac)

Respondents identified a need to at least try and separate their on duty self from their off duty self. However, in many cases as previously noted, the distinction between an on duty and off duty self was difficult to maintain over time. Often it seemed the on duty self eventually carried over to when an officer was no longer working; especially whenever aspects of the work environment crossed into the non-work environment (e.g., running into former prisoners on the street, worrying about safety). In-

deed, when environmental or situational cues from the prison passed to the outside the perceived barriers between the two worlds seemed to dissolve and the ability to distinguish between selves followed suit.

Among some respondents there was a shared perception of how they changed that expressed, indirectly or directly, their growing need for power and dominance. This desire for power was not necessarily such that officers wanted to be dominators in their overall life; rather they wanted to be authoritative and in a position of status in their officer role (e.g., supervisor, super-intendant, etc.) in their workplace. Said another way, they wanted prisoners to view them as powerful. The theme *power hungry* captures how the presentation and identification of self as authoritative and "controlling" began to seem central to the officer role and officer-prisoner relationship and thus, impacted their overall sense of self. In line with Stryker's (1980) argument, that the playing out of role identity across situations and frequently can encourage embracement of this role identity, the consistent presentation of an authoritative self when interacting with prisoners can easily create a sense of self that is the most salient for some officers.

Some officers described their use of power to control prisoners, repeatedly. They explained that exerting their power was simply a necessary part of the job – prisoners "needed" to know the officer was in charge. In the words of John: "they have to learn that [the easy way] or they're going to have to learn it the hard way. There are other ways [to teach it]: play mind games with them, not get in their business, [but] take the TV away from them. They're like kids." However, others spoke of more

subtle ways, such as locking prisoners in their cells for 24 hours, that they found just as effective in displaying their authority. This need for an authoritative presence at work appeared to be largely a consequence of the unique and violent dynamics inherent to the corrections environment. The actions officers witnessed on a daily basis alone, with or without awareness of the details of exact crimes prisoners had been charged or convicted of committing, suggested to officers that without authority – control and power – they would be more vulnerable.

(Un)comfortably numb is a theme that captures how at a certain time in the careers of some correctional officers their self-conception as officers became static and resistant to change. Said another way, these officers could look back and note a significant change in their personality or self that differed from the previous meanings and feelings they attached to their correctional officer identity. For example, some officers spoke about their realization that they had become less sensitive to the challenges experienced by the prisoners. Whereas, they felt they previously cared more and respected prisoners at least at a basic level of human rights – they wanted to see them succeed and thought they had a chance at "making it" on the outside. These same respondents, however, now felt that they had developed an increasingly negative, non-sympathetic, disgruntled view of the prisoners over time. They viewed these incarcerated men as deserving of their situations, unable to change, and problematic for society. Respondents tended to feel that "usually when they're arrested, they're arrested for a reason" (Si) or "99% of the time they were in there because they deserved to be in there" (Jep). Thus, it appeared that, particularly, as correctional

officers became engrossed in the criminal justice system, seeing the “revolving door” (e.g., the same prisoners leaving and returning to prison over and over again), and embracing the structural and interactional dynamics within the prison system, their sense of self changed in accordance to these experiences. It became shaped by the environment in which they were exposed most often – their work. Some officers extended this discussion to include how their experiences of the adverse, violent, and threat-filled penal environment started to negatively affect their sense of self when working. Likewise, over time this sense of self, as they interacted more and more within this negative environment, became their dominant self.

Indeed, officers, over the course of their employment working with adult men, described seeing everything from men being killed to fathers and sons sharing a cell; they talked about seeing suicides, self-harming acts, abandonment (by wives and families), loss, tears, volatile anger, and everything in between. Many had held dying men in their arms, feared acquiring non-curable diseases on the job, cut down men who had hung themselves, had feces or urine thrown at them repeatedly, seen the aftermath of shanks (knives) in circulation, and other tragic behaviors. The cumulative effect of these experiences appeared to result in some officers taking on a static, negative orientation. In some ways this could be viewed as becoming desensitized, however, it was definitely more than that. This static orientation followed these officers in all realms of life and extended beyond the prison – it became their new, dominant sense of self. Said another way, they learned to minimize their feelings toward otherwise negative realities largely because such experiences

were simply part of their everyday life and played a role in *defining* who they had become. Mac discussed his experiences in court at an inquest for a prisoner that had died in his arms, of natural causes. In doing so, he alludes to his emerging awareness of how his sense of self had changed:

...[the parents] were up at the front and the mother was crying. Now we're talking almost two years after the kid had passed. And, it was at that time that it hit me, I didn't care that that kid died. I didn't care that that he was twenty-two, twenty-three years old and gone. In my...in my opinion, or my feeling at that time was “Oh well, okay, the world's better off without somebody like that.” But then, when I was at the coroner's inquest, I saw the mother crying and the father hugging her, it was at that time I went “Wow, that kid had a mother and father and probably brothers and sisters and friends who, who cared for him.”

For some officers, it was such occasions that reminded them of who they “used to be” (e.g., their previous emotionality or sensitivity to the plight of prisoners, or their less soured orientation to corrections) before or at the start of their current occupation.

Many officers, who were in their mid-thirties or older, described recognizing and not necessarily being comfortable with this change in their sense of self. Those few who were no longer employed in corrections experienced personal struggles post-employment when they realized just how negative and insensitive they had become. Indeed, some officers spoke about their wives, children or parents reminding them to “check” their on duty self at the door when they returned home after a day of work – perhaps a strategy to help hold on to their “older self.” These men often cited their supportive and strong wives or other family

members, who often would not tolerate their hostility in the home environment, as the persons who reminded them of just how much their outlooks, and even the language they use in conversation, had changed (e.g., “I was married, when I went to work at the jail and my wife said: “Boy, you didn't used to talk like this”” [Matt]). In the same realm, other officers spoke about being reminded to “be sensitive.” Overall, these men discussed their challenges as they learned to trust again and reach out to people anew as they began to interact in new settings or situations. Others still employed in corrections talked about their well-being and needing to change before their relationships with their families became too strained or their insensitive nature lead them to disassociate themselves from others. However, a small, yet notable proportion of older respondents talked about eventually becoming soft again; becoming less negative, more patient, and more understanding. Often these men had personal experiences that were trying in nature (e.g., loss of loved ones, deaths, incarcerated family, etc.) and recognizing that the world was not always a positive place and it was not their place to lay any judgment.

Concluding Thoughts

Correctional officers are surrounded by threat and the potential of being harmed, psychologically, physically, and interpersonally, while on duty and, even possibly, in the community. This study is aimed at understanding how provincial correctional officers, working with adult males, perceived this prison environment (Q1), the threats they experienced at work (Q2), how they negotiated their safety in this work environment (Q3), and how such threat impacted their sense of self (Q4). We found

among respondents that the threat of violence was very real; it was an ever-looming and largely anticipated reality (Q1, Q2). The prison environment is perceived as being shaped by this potential for violence and its threat, which stem from elements native to the prison work environment (e.g., overcrowding, the prisoners, stress, deprivation, etc.) itself. In consequence, officers tended to view violence in the prison as largely unavoidable. In this context, their understanding of the penal environment created their need to be wary, on guard, and primed for threat – or they were even more likely to be harmed.

In describing their experiences of threat, officers began to reveal the multiple meanings and feelings attached to their sense of their role as officers. Officers' identities ranged from “counselors” to “controllers” and such identities could change at any moment depending on if or how threatened they felt (Q4). In turn, officers' behaviors were shaped by a desire to maintain their safety (Q3) – the potential for violence in a penal environment could never be disregarded or forgotten. Their duties pertaining to the officer role – the need to ensure the safety, security, and control of prisoners, society, and colleagues while also assisting with prisoner care and rehabilitation – created challenges for officers as they sought to mitigate personal threat to their physical safety, as well as their self-concept (Q3, Q4).

Differences exist in how officers tried to diminish this experience of threat and create some semblance of safety while on duty or, even, in the community (Q3). Respondents described a variety of tactics used to maintain “safety” in the prisons, which revolved largely around their self-presentation, their relationships with their colleagues, and their

relationship with the prisoners. Officers opted to create a presentation of self that was authoritative and confident – ensuring that all prisoners knew just “who” was in charge or had control (Q4). Some worked on their muscularity in order to be presented as physically dominant and strong, while others discussed using their verbal skills to build rapport and create positive relationships between themselves and the prisoners. Overall, officers described self-presentation, understanding of the social nuances of prisoner daily life, the dynamics of co-worker relationships, and the importance of communication, as well as positive-professional relationships with prisoners as effective strategies in reducing threat.

The social dynamics related to the experience of and/or mitigation of threat was connected to an officer’s self-concept. The social context in which the correctional officers work plays an integral part, as well as their interaction with colleagues, administration, and prisoners in defining who they are and who they become as persons over time (Q4). Indeed, not only does the perception of threat shape the officers’ work experience, it also has a profound impact on personal identity, behavior, and personal outlook – their sense of self. Significantly, we note that how the role of correctional officer shapes an officer’s personal “self” in light of threat, despite it being an expected and natural element of the correctional officer occupation, was largely unrecognized by officers. Only in retrospect and/or after many years on the job, did the complex impact of their experiences of threat on their sense of self become acknowledged. In this regard, some officers described becoming “hard” and this “hardness” becoming inherent to their self. Some stressed a desire for “power” and an authoritative

element in their self-conception that had started to gain precedence in their day-to-day work lives and perhaps even at home. For these officers, the correctional officer role was no longer maintained at work and instead largely became a salient identity. Moreover, some respondents even discussed a “numbness” or “desensitization” that suggested their perception of their self as a correctional officer had become static and resistant to change.

The hardness and authoritativeness that developed while on duty for many correctional officers was readily identified by their family and/or friends outside of the work environment. Although this self was created and reinforced through interactions in the prison environment, where it successfully assisted with the construction of safety and the mitigation of threat, some participants were aware that the change in self was gradual, yet, eventually, did become permanent for some – self as “correctional officer” was a salient self. In consequence, this self unconsciously surfaced both on and off duty and had implications for the personal relationships, persona, and life of officers. Particularly, it appeared that the desire or even need to be safe and reduce threat by adopting an authoritative presence and a hardened outlook by many had a dramatic impact, usually negative, on an officer’s identity and life outside of work. Indeed, the interrelationships between perception of threat, negotiation of safety, and sense of self are many.

To exemplify, these interrelationships would suggest that lacking emotionality toward and sympathy for prisoners was a strategy thought to allow officers to enforce protocol, prevent their manipulation by prisoners or other officers, and, as a result, increase their safety while on duty. However,

this lack of emotionality potentially carried over into their life beyond the prison walls, where changes in sense of self (e.g. personality, behavior, perspective) could be personally noted by others close to respondents. These changes were often reflected on comparatively (e.g., who they were now *versus* who they had been prior to their career in corrections) and, often, it became apparent that who they were on duty soon influenced who they were off duty.

Overall, the management of threat for correctional officers is complex and vital to the performance of their roles and duties and has a significant impact on their sense of self. It is also clear that ensuring one’s safety in the prison environment cannot be

realistically achieved through elementary physical or psychological means alone. Careful social navigation, fostering rapport and respect from prisoners through effective communication and perception are, in fact, considered to be some of the most effective tools at the disposal of correctional officers in managing the threat-filled occupation. Perhaps, further exploration of the experience of threat will provide insight that may benefit officers new to the field or currently within the field in terms of managing personal safety and its impact on self. Regardless, the presence of threat is undoubtedly a complex experience that appears universal among officers working with adult men. It provides a unique lens in examining the social nuances unique to a highly dangerous and underexplored profession.

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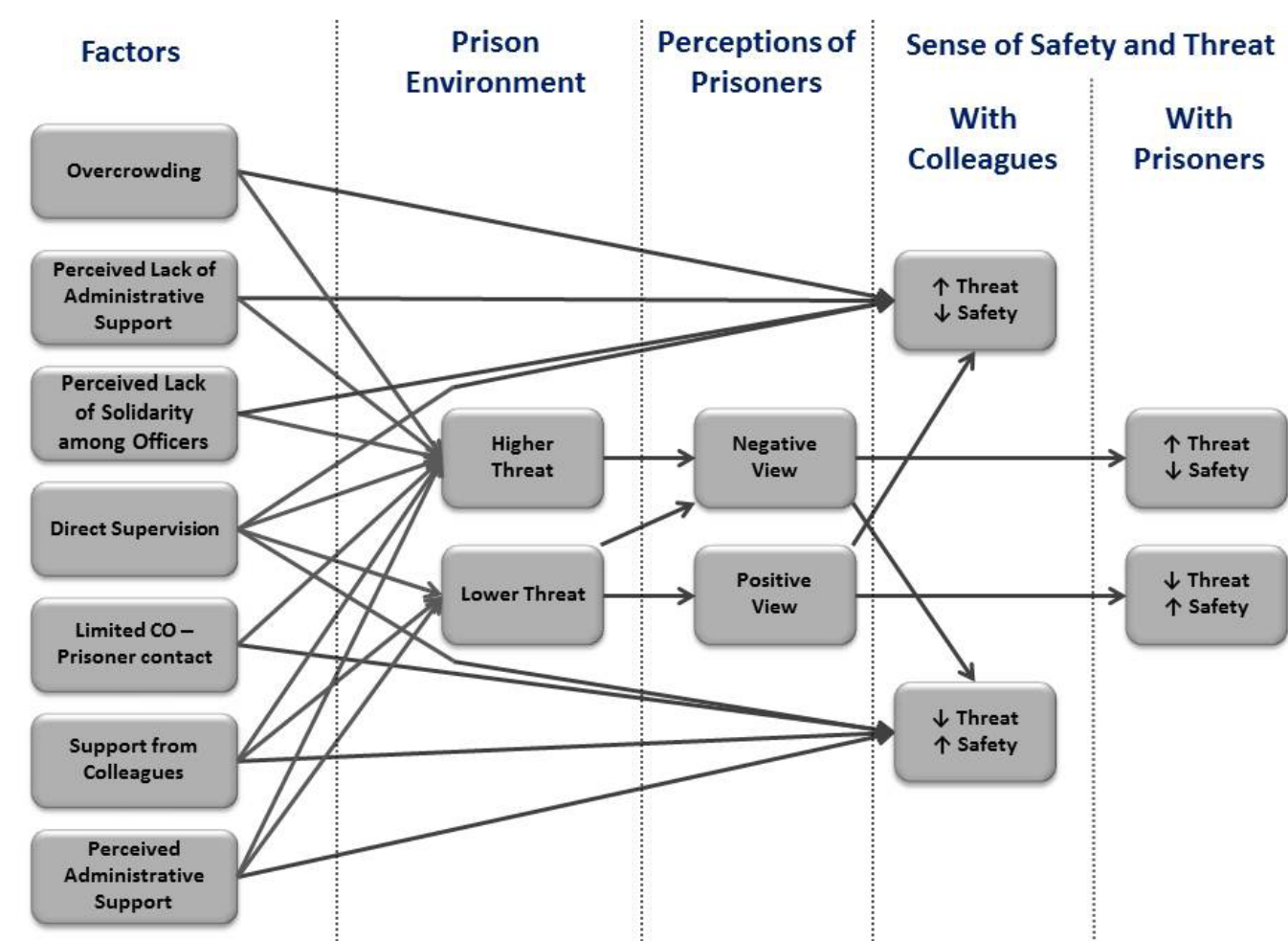
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Appendix A

Figure 1. A Conceptual Map of Data in Answer to Research Question 1.



The column on the far left notes the factors that are linked to officers’ perceptions of threat. The next column indicates how these factors are linked to a characterization of high/low threat in the prison environment. The remaining three columns capture how officers perceive prisoners and whether or not they feel safe or threatened in their interactions with colleagues and prisoners.

Source: self-elaboration.

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