

**Open Up and Let Us In: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Emerging Issues in
Correctional Policy, Research, and Practice**

Ashley B. Batastini

Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology

Jennifer Eno Louden

Department of Psychology, The University of Texas at El Paso

Virginia Barber-Rioja

Department of Psychology, New York University

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Abstract

Correctional psychology tends to receive less attention in the psychology-law literature than topics more often associated with forensic psychology. While these subfields overlap to some extent, correctional psychologists encounter unique issues related to practice, policy, research, ethics, and training. In addition to the lack of attention within psychology, correctional institutions and departments can be slow to embrace new ideas and methods to advance these systems. Issues such as institutional over-crowding, limited financial resources, geographical remoteness, low staff recruitment and retention, safety and security constraints, and administrative philosophies that favor punishment over rehabilitation can keep correctional systems from moving beyond the status quo. However, correctional agencies are facing increased pressures to explore alternative solutions that balance crime reduction with humane care and commonsense policies. This special issue includes eight articles highlighting a wide range of topics including the impact of working conditions on correctional staff well-being and burnout, self-harm and suicide prevention services, interventions for high-risk populations, and novel data collection strategies. We hope the work presented in this special issue reinforces the need to not only conduct, but also publish more corrections-focused research in leading psychology-law outlets, even when (and perhaps especially when) such work is done in the field.

Keywords: corrections, research, prison, jail, community supervision, correctional officers

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Correctional psychology is an often-misunderstood field. Although the distinction between correctional and forensic psychology has evolved, they have more recently been conceptualized as distinct but overlapping subdisciplines that fall under the umbrella of psychology-law (Neal, 2018). Although both subfields pertain to psychology's involvement in legal systems and stem from similar historical roots, they often have differing goals, training needs, and ethical considerations (Neal, 2018, Brodsky, 2018). Correctional psychology has been defined as the application of psychological practice and research to the classification, treatment, and management of individuals involved predominantly in the criminal legal system, whereas forensic psychology broadly refers to the application of psychological practice and research to help resolve legal, contractual, and administrative matters (Neal, 2018).

The issues addressed by correctional psychologists can be relevant at the pre-adjudication stage when applied to individuals in pre-trial detention (or on remand) and at the post-adjudication stage when applied to those who have been convicted and are either incarcerated or supervised in the community (Barber-Rioja et al., 2023; Neal, 2018). Although encouraged, correctional psychologists are not currently expected to have specialized training experiences in the same way clinical forensic psychologists are (Neal, 2018; Magaletta & Patry, 2020). Psychologists working in corrections also often need to toggle between practice standards of the profession of psychology (e.g., APA, 2017) and guidelines specific to correctional environments (e.g., the National Commission on Correctional Health Care's Standards for Mental Health Services in Correctional Facilities, 2015), which do not always align (see Weinberger & Sreenivasan, 1994 for a discussion of ethical conflicts in correctional psychology).

Criminal legal issues addressed by forensic psychologists are predominantly relevant at the pre-adjudication stage such as adjudicative competency or mental state at the time of the offense (Neal, 2018). Forensic psychologists are also often involved in civil matters such as parental fitness or disability claims. However, the tasks correctional and forensic psychologists are asked to perform may overlap to some extent; for example, using re-offense risk tools to assist with sentencing or supervision placement and release decisions, or civil litigation related to harms caused by incarceration or negligence of care. Further, clinical work as a forensic psychologist—at least in the United States—is guided by the American Psychological Association’s *Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology* (APA, 2013) and is considered a specialty area, meaning it requires specific pre-doctoral and/or post-doctoral experience. The *Specialty Guidelines* (APA, 2013) unfortunately have far less utility in correctional psychological practice (DeMatteo et al., 2023).

In general, correctional psychology has received less attention from the professional and research communities (Brodsky, 2018). There appears to be significantly more research within psychology-law dedicated to forensic psychology than correctional psychology. In drafting this introductory article, for example, we conducted a cursory search in the PsycINFO database for articles with either "correctional psychology" or "forensic psychology" as the keyword; the former returned just 80 results compared to 1488 for the latter. Furthermore, few doctoral programs or psychology internships offer coursework or applied training in correctional psychology, and jobs in correctional settings are typically seen as less desirable than those in forensic settings, likely due to misconceptions about working in correctional facilities (Fagan & Ax, 2011; Morris & West, 2020). In sum, no major professional resources from psychology-law

have been invested into developing correctional psychology as a defined subdiscipline (Brodsky, 2018).

The depth and breadth of scholarly foundations in correctional psychology also varies depending on the setting in which psychologists practice. Most of the literature on correctional psychology has been dedicated to prisons. Although prisons and jails are less differentiated in some jurisdictions or countries, prisons typically house individuals who have been convicted and sentenced to longer periods of incarceration (Batastini et al., 2023a). The literature on diversion courts and community corrections (e.g., probation, parole) is also more robust (e.g., Labrecque, 2017; Labrecque et al., 2023). Correctional practice in jails or remand centers, however, has received much less attention even though these facilities tend to oversee a more clinically acute and unstable population than prisons, most of whom have not yet been adjudicated of an offense (Digard & Swavola, 2019). Furthermore, different systems of incarceration (e.g., federal, state, military, tribal, immigration detention) have different practice and policy needs that are often not captured by the existing literature.

It would be unfair, however, to pin the overall lack of attention on correctional psychology singularly on the profession of psychology-law. Correctional institutions and departments can be slow-moving regarding practice developments, policy reform, and research engagement. Long-standing issues such as prison over-crowding, limited financial resources, geographical remoteness, low staff recruitment and retention, safety and security constraints, and traditional administrative values that favor punishment over rehabilitation may stifle the implementation of more innovative and progressive efforts. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic hit correctional institutions especially hard, exacerbating many of these limitations and shining a brighter light on the need for reforms (Nowotny et al., 2020). However, increasing calls

from advocacy groups, scholars, and the public have placed pressures on correctional systems to explore alternative solutions that balance crime reduction with humane care and commonsense policies (Day, 2020; Franklin, 2017; Ramdath & Young, 2023). As jails, prisons, and even community corrections continue to serve as major mental health providers (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017; Gómez-Figueroa & Camino-Proaña 2022), innovations specific to psychological interventions are especially relevant. This special issue was convened to highlight emerging issues and inventive trends in correctional psychology research and practice that can inform policy and reform decisions.

Living with Less-than-Perfect in a World of Challenges

Those who have conducted research in correctional environments—to include jails, prisons, juvenile justice centers, immigration and customs detention facilities, and community supervision departments—are no strangers to the challenges of this work. Research involving individuals who are involuntarily detained is particularly difficult due to participants' designation as a vulnerable population. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), all persons in detention under criminal or civil statute are considered “prisoners” and more stringent ethics guidelines apply (45 CFR §46.107). However, misunderstood or misapplied ethical protections either by correctional departments or ethics review boards has arguably led “prisoner” participants to be overprotected and, as a result, understudied (Cislo & Trestman, 2013). Beyond these ethical considerations, corrections-focused research (perhaps especially that which explores innovative or novel practices) can be thwarted by the very nature of the correctional environment, the intended participant pool, the research team or their institution, or other parties involved in the execution of the project. For example, research conducted in corrections institutions often requires security clearances for external researchers to

enter, staff to escort researchers and participants to secure and confidential areas, administrative personnel (who are already spread thin) to help extract and de-identify data from electronic records, data collection methods that appropriately conceal whether or not someone agreed to participate, cooperation from participants who are prone to distrust researchers, and working around other daily operations that take precedence and are often unpredictable (e.g., meal times, lock downs, attorney visits, medical or mental health appointments; Bosworth et al., 2005; Field et al., 2019; Waldram, 2009). Though grossly needed, tightly controlled research with correctional populations may be near impossible without significant funding, agency support, personnel power, and time. Thus, while randomized control trials (RCTs) are considered the “gold standard” for determining whether an intervention is effective (Bucklen, 2020), most studies conducted in correctional environments struggle to reach this bar.

Yet, not all evidence about the effectiveness of new approaches in correctional practice or policy comes from research. Whether a project is research depends on the intended use of the data and implementation of a commonly accepted scientific process (HHS Office of Research Integrity § 46.102(d)). For example, if a correctional department adopts a new program to reduce assaults against staff and tracks whether assaults decline following program initiation with the goal of informing continued funding for the program, the project is not research. Conversely, if the department randomly assigns some incarcerated persons to complete the new program and others to a control condition, assesses whether program completers assault staff less frequently than those in the control, and intends to contribute to the broader correctional literature on the effectiveness of programs that can reduce staff assaults, the project is most likely research. In many cases, program or policy changes are first and foremost designed to improve conditions within a specific institution or agency; sharing outcomes with a wider audience is a secondary

aim (if one at all). While non-research evaluations can speed up some portions of the implementation and dissemination process (e.g., ethics board approval is only required for research; see Bucklen, 2020), they can be exceptionally “messy” because they tend to rely even more heavily on existing resources and staff who may have limited understanding about how to systematically collect, manage, or track data than research involving external investigators.

Regardless of whether the endeavor is labeled as research or not, publishing the results of less-than-perfectly executed correctional initiatives can be informative. First, it can showcase the outcomes that could be reasonably expected or observed without the bells and whistles required for a highly internally valid research study. Second, these publications allow researchers and agencies to share lessons learned and recommendations that may help others avoid similar pitfalls and/or improve their own strategies for determining whether a new intervention is benefitting the people under their care. Many of the articles in this special issue likewise detail less-than-perfect attempts to translate and evaluate new ideas in the field, but all provide essential information to move correctional psychology in a more optimally rehabilitative direction.

Stringently gatekeeping the results of new correctional psychological practices contributes to the already limited guidance available to clinicians, trainees, administrators, and academics. Improving the accessibility of correctional research and evaluative outcomes may require journal editors and reviewers to relax their expectations and understand that limitations deemed unforgivable in other areas of psychological study may be less of a deal-breaker when the work is completed in a correctional environment. Of course, we do not advocate for the eradication of any expectations; having no gate at all is likely to lead to misguided (at best) and iatrogenic (at worst) decisions. But, can we learn to live a little more comfortably among the

messiness? We hope this collection of articles highlights that results from less-than-perfect, yet sufficiently data-driven, efforts can be incrementally impactful.

Overview of Articles in the Special Issue

We are excited to present the articles in this issue, which address a wide range of topics including the impact of general working conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic on correctional staff well-being and burnout, self-harm and suicide prevention interventions, interventions for high-risk populations, and novel methods of data collection.

Logan and colleagues (2023) examined whether correctional staff with prior military service had lower levels of burnout compared to staff with no military background. Staffing shortages in correctional facilities and other criminal-legal agencies that were described by the National Institute of Justice in 2019 as a “crisis” have compounded since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to dangerous conditions in facilities and increased stress on existing staff who are tasked with picking up the slack (Thrush, 2023). In their survey of 1,896 employees in three Utah agencies (the state department of corrections, a city police department, and a sheriff’s office), Logan et al. found that, although prior military service was not associated with burnout in general, it was related to lower levels of emotional exhaustion (a component of burnout) among employees. Interestingly, employees with more years of service experienced more burnout, though age was inversely related to burnout, suggesting the maturity that comes with age, rather than years on the job, protects against burnout. The authors discuss several specific recommendations for training staff that are relevant to veterans and non-veterans alike with the aim of reducing burnout and preventing staff turnover.

In a study focused more on correctional officers (COs) and administrators in county jails, Ferdick (2023) used semi-structured qualitative interviews to better understand how COVID-19

directly affected those working on the frontlines. No known studies have captured such nuanced and personalized perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on jail staff. The author highlighted the variable measures taken by staff to help contain the spread of the virus, how procedural changes impacted day-to-day operations, and how these changes and anxieties about the illness itself contributed to or exacerbated mental health issues. Overall, staff felt positively toward the jail's efforts to reduce the spread of the virus, despite experiencing increased stress levels as a result of the pandemic. Ferdick (2023) showcased the importance of implementing policies that are viewed by line staff as important and worth following, as well as the need for collective investment in promoting health and safety for all persons living or working within the facility.

Acknowledging the high turnover rate among COs, Ferdik & Pica (2023) examined the impact of mental illness symptoms in officers' intention to resign. The authors collected questionnaire data from COs working in statewide county jails and found COs who scored higher on clinical measures that screened for PTSD, depression, anxiety, alcohol use disorder, and panic attacks, had a greater desire to leave their jobs. However, these results were mitigated by resilience. Notably, this study also found that at least one-third of participants disclosed some type of exposure to at least one potentially psychologically traumatizing event, which highlights the stressful working conditions of COs. Considering these findings, the authors recommended correctional policies that consider resilience during pre-employment screening, offer training to enhance resilience, and improve COs working conditions.

Moving beyond staffing issues, Batastini et al. (2023b) presented findings from a longitudinal evaluation of a cognitive-behavioral program for people incarcerated in restrictive housing. These environments present added constraints to service delivery and, as a result, specialized interventions are currently lacking for this harder-to-treat population (Batastini et al.,

2023c). In expanding on a previously published pilot study (Batastini et al., 2021), results showed promise for reducing reactive criminal thinking, general antisocial attitudes, and emotional distress over time. However, the authors acknowledged the need for additional research examining changes in important behavioral outcomes such as institutional misconduct and rates of return to restrictive placement after release.

Focusing on another high-risk and high-needs population, Obegi (2023) provided a rubric by which correctional facilities can monitor the effectiveness of programs aimed at preventing the suicide of incarcerated persons. Suicide is the leading cause of death among individuals housed in jails and is the third leading cause of death among those housed in prisons (Berman & Canning, 2022). Therefore, suicide prevention programs are a crucial step towards enhancing the health and safety of people housed in these facilities, yet can be difficult to assess. Obegi focused on three types of implementation outcomes for such programs—penetration, sustainability, and quality of delivery—which are discussed at multiple stages of decision points in facilities. For each, practical guidance is offered that can be tailored to the unique needs of a facility.

Berezin and colleagues (2023) offered guidance to improve the way institutional data are collected and analyzed. The authors discuss a six-step process for applying the Critical Case File (CCF) approach, which is intended to further delineate important structural disparities contributing to differing experiences of marginalized persons within correctional systems, so these disparities can be more adequately addressed. In line with increased attention on placing cultural, systemic, and intersectional considerations at the forefront of correctional research (Batastini et al., 2022), these authors provided researchers a pathway to view data obtained from file records through these lenses. This article is an essential read for putting culturally informed methodologies into practice.

Finally, Trahan and Evans (2023) turned their attention to family members of incarcerated individuals. While much of the literature focuses on those behind the walls, few studies have considered the perspectives and experiences of the people remaining on the outside. Individuals who have committed sexual offenses are particularly prone to harsher public and policy responses (Harper et al., 2017). These responses may directly or indirectly impact those closest to the person facing such backlash. Specially, Trahan and Evans qualitatively explored family members' perceptions of legal system legitimacy across multiple stages, arguing their experiences have important implications for effective criminal justice practices such as community policing, as well as understanding cycles of legal involvement/incarceration and other socioeconomic consequences. Family member experiences were categorized into four themes: first contact, trial, incarceration, and post-release. While some research shows family members sometimes reject individuals due to the nature of their offense (Kras, 2018), responses from 28 participants largely reflected decreased legitimacy, such that the legal system was viewed as harmful and unfair to the person who offended.

Although these articles address separate—though often interconnected—issues for persons impacted by or working in correctional systems, they all make one fact clear: correctional settings are a high stakes environment. One article (Obegi, 2023) focused on the prevalence and prevention of self-harm. Another (Batastini et al., 2023) tackled one of the most challenging and resource-draining incarcerated populations. Others emphasized the need to do better understand marginalized people in-custody (Berezin et al., 2023) who tend to be given less individualized attention despite their over-representation, as well as people indirectly effected by incarceration (Trahan & Evans, 2023). Finding innovative yet feasible ways to address complex issues that have major societal impacts is difficult under the best of circumstances. However, as

illustrated by the works of Logan et al. (2023), Ferdick (2023), and Ferdick & Pica (2023), staffing crises exacerbated by the pandemic are likely placing additional constraints on researchers. In particular, staff are presenting with high rates of burnout, turnover, and clinical symptoms. Empirical work within corrections has become increasingly difficult, which makes it all the more pressing for the field of psychology-law to amplify its support for correctional research and the dissemination of this work.

There's Always More Work to Do

Although we did not intend for this special section to be U.S.-centric, it is notable that most of the articles report research conducted in the United States. This is perhaps a reflection of the unique problems facing corrections in the U.S., which incarcerates more of its residents than any other nation (World Prison Brief, 2018). Mass incarceration in the U.S., as evinced by a 500% increase in the number of people imprisoned in the past 50 years, has many interrelated consequences that have been the focus of recent reform efforts, such as the disproportionate justice-involvement of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous people relative to their representation in the general population, high rates of recidivism, and the pre-trial detention of people who have not yet been convicted of a crime (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023; The Sentencing Project, 2023). It is clear clinical practice and research in correctional settings requires an understanding of the societal forces and structural inequities that have shaped the American correctional system (Oryema et al., 2023). Despite recent policy initiatives such as the Second Chance Act that are targeted toward reform (e.g., Miller et al., 2019), more work needs to be done and researchers have been prolific in evaluating the current state of affairs and identifying opportunities for improvement (see Beckett, 2018; Bonta, 2023; Phelps, 2020 for some recent reviews).

While research based in the United States is clearly needed to address the myriad problems facing the U.S. corrections system, research with an international scope is simultaneously needed to address the unique concerns facing other nations and to evaluate the strategies that have been implemented to improve outcomes for individuals involved in those criminal legal systems. However, the prominence of racial and ethnic disparities is not a problem isolated to the U.S. carceral system. In Australia, for example, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prisons is rising (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Despite some measures designed to reduce biased decision-making, Canada continues to grapple with the over-presentation of Black and Indigenous peoples (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2021). In European countries, foreign nationals (i.e., people not native to the prosecuting country) tend to experience disproportionate criminal legal contact (Nagrecha, 2021).

In addition to including more international work, several correctional psychology topics were not well represented in this special issue but are desperately in need of further exploration and expansion. These include, but are certainly not limited to, evaluations of both brief and longer-term interventions for more difficult to manage individuals (e.g., those with frequent disruptive/assaultive behaviors, acute clinical care needs, chronic substance use); efficacy of culturally driven, gender-responsive, and/or trauma-informed interventions; development of more efficient and reliable screening and assessment tools (e.g., suicide prevention screenings, risk assessments to inform release from restrictive housing); integration of technology (e.g., virtual reality, mobile apps, videoconferencing platforms) to improve service access or responsivity for incarcerated clients; more widespread attention to dissecting the carceral experiences and needs of diverse subpopulations (e.g., various racial and ethnic groups, trans persons); and assessing training programs for custody staff that promote a cultural shift in how

individuals are treated and supervised. Further, research is needed at the intersection of these topics. For example, Eno Loudon and colleagues (2023) found little research on the cross-cultural validation of mental health screenings used in correctional institutions to identify treatment needs for Black and Hispanic clients. Finally, we encourage more efforts to refine existing and emerging theories of correctional practice, so they are more applicable to more people in more settings and circumstances. Good theory is the driving force behind good science (Ward, 2019). Even the developers and proponents of the heavily relied upon Risk-Need-Responsivity model have encouraged malleability of the theory to fit evolving needs and scientific advances (Bourgon & Bonta, 2014; Bonta, 2019).

Final Thoughts

One of the many challenges faced by correctional researchers who seek to publish their work is that journals and peer reviewers often do not understand the constraints of conducting research in these settings and hold correctional research to standards that may be applicable to the laboratory but impossible in correctional settings (Batastini et al., in prep). As researchers, we have a responsibility to publish our work so it can be scrutinized by scientists and other consumers (National Research Council, 1992). This scrutiny is what allows our theories and methods to evolve. Andrews and Bonta stated it simply: “Unsparing criticism is a major source of advancement” (2010, p. 7). But, we must be afforded the opportunity and space to get our work out there to a wider audience. The articles in this special issue are evidence that corrections-focused research is worthy of publication in leading psychology-law journals.

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