
Correctional Officers

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Significant Points

- The work can be stressful and hazardous.
- Most correctional officers are employed in State and local government prisons and jails.
- Job opportunities are expected to be excellent.

Nature of the Work

Correctional officers, also known as *detention officers*, are responsible for overseeing individuals who have been arrested and are awaiting trial or who have been convicted of a crime and sentenced to serve time in a jail, reformatory, or penitentiary.

The jail population changes constantly as some are released, some are convicted and transferred to prison, and new offenders are arrested and enter the system. Correctional officers in local jails admit and process about 12 million people a year, with about 700,000 offenders in jail at any given time. Correctional officers in State and Federal prisons watch over the approximately 1.5 million offenders who are incarcerated there at any given time.

Correctional officers maintain security and inmate accountability to prevent disturbances, assaults, and escapes. Officers have no law enforcement responsibilities outside the institution where they work. (For more information on related occupations, see the statements on police and detectives and on probation officers and correctional treatment specialists, elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Regardless of the setting, correctional officers maintain order within the institution and enforce rules and regulations. To help ensure that inmates are orderly and obey rules, correctional officers monitor the activities and supervise the work assignments of inmates. Sometimes, officers must search inmates and their living quarters for contraband like weapons or drugs, settle disputes between inmates, and enforce discipline. Correctional officers periodically inspect the facilities, checking cells and other areas of the institution for unsanitary conditions, contraband, fire hazards, and any evidence of infractions of rules. In addition, they routinely inspect locks, window bars, grilles, doors, and gates for signs of tampering. Finally, officers inspect mail and visitors for prohibited items.

Correctional officers report orally and in writing on inmate conduct and on the quality and quantity of work done by inmates. Officers also report security breaches, disturbances, violations of rules, and any unusual occurrences. They usually keep a daily log or record of their activities. Correctional officers cannot show favoritism and must report any inmate who violates the rules. If a crime is committed within their institution or an inmate escapes, they help the responsible law enforcement authorities investigate or search for the escapee. In jail and prison facilities with direct supervision of cellblocks, officers work unarmed. They are equipped with communications devices so that they can summon help if necessary. These officers often work in a cellblock alone, or with another officer, among the 50 to 100 inmates who reside there. The officers

enforce regulations primarily through their interpersonal communication skills and through the use of progressive sanctions, such as the removal of some privileges.

In the highest security facilities, where the most dangerous inmates are housed, correctional officers often monitor the activities of prisoners from a centralized control center with closed-circuit television cameras and a computer tracking system. In such an environment, the inmates may not see anyone but officers for days or weeks at a time and may leave their cells only for showers, solitary exercise time, or visitors. Depending on the offenders' security classification within the institution, correctional officers may have to restrain inmates in handcuffs and leg irons to safely escort them to and from cells and other areas and to see authorized visitors. Officers also escort prisoners between the institution and courtrooms, medical facilities, and other destinations outside the institution.

Bailiffs, also known as *marshals* or *court officers*, are law enforcement officers who maintain safety and order in courtrooms. Their duties, which vary by location, include enforcing courtroom rules, assisting judges, guarding juries from outside contact, delivering court documents, and providing general security for courthouses.

Work environment. Working in a correctional institution can be stressful and hazardous. Every year, correctional officers are injured in confrontations with inmates. Correctional officers may work indoors or outdoors. Some correctional institutions are well lighted, temperature controlled, and ventilated, but others are old, overcrowded, hot, and noisy. Although both jails and prisons can be dangerous places to work, prison populations are more stable than jail populations, and correctional officers in prisons know the security and custodial requirements of the prisoners with whom they are dealing.

Correctional officers usually work an 8-hour day, 5 days a week, on rotating shifts. Because prison and jail security must be provided around the clock, officers work all hours of the day and night, weekends, and holidays. In addition, officers may be required to work paid overtime.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Correctional officers learn most of what they need to know for their work through on-the-job training. Qualifications vary by agency, but all agencies require a high school diploma or equivalent, and some also require some college education or full-time work experience.

Education and training. A high school diploma or graduation equivalency degree is required by all employers. The Federal Bureau of Prisons requires entry-level correctional officers to have at least a bachelor's degree; 3 years of full-time experience in a field providing counseling, assistance, or supervision to individuals; or a combination of the two. Some State and local corrections agencies require some college credits, but law enforcement or military experience may be substituted to fulfill this requirement.

Federal, State, and some local departments of corrections provide training for correctional officers based on guidelines established by the American Correctional Association and the American Jail Association. Some States have regional training academies that are available to local agencies. At the conclusion of formal instruction, all State and local correctional agencies provide on-the-job training, including training on legal restrictions and interpersonal relations. Many systems require

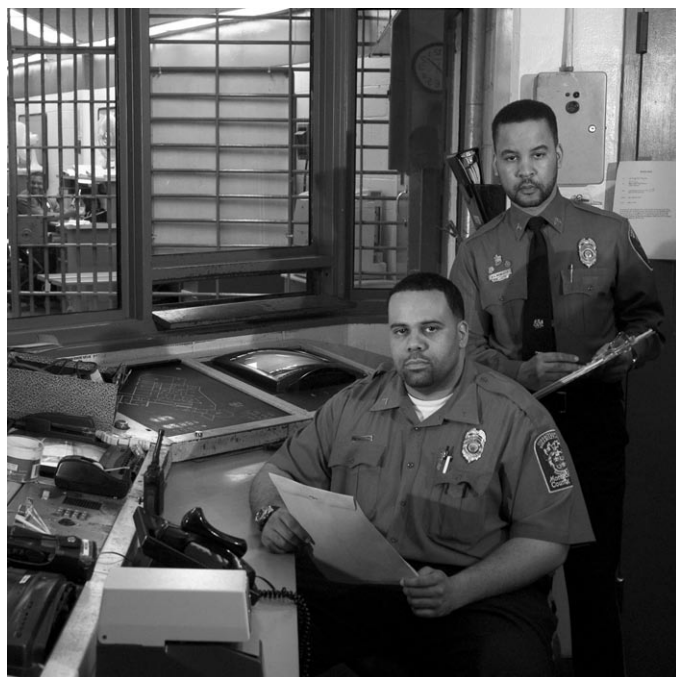
firearms proficiency and self-defense skills. Officer trainees typically receive several weeks or months of training in an actual job setting under the supervision of an experienced officer. However, on-the-job training varies widely from agency to agency.

Academy trainees generally receive instruction in a number of subjects, including institutional policies, regulations, and operations, as well as custody and security procedures. New Federal correctional officers must undergo 200 hours of formal training within the first year of employment. They also must complete 120 hours of specialized training at the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons residential training center at Glynco, GA, within 60 days of their appointment. Experienced officers receive annual in-service training to keep abreast of new developments and procedures.

Some correctional officers are members of prison tactical response teams, which are trained to respond to disturbances, riots, hostage situations, forced cell moves, and other potentially dangerous confrontations. Team members practice disarming prisoners wielding weapons, protecting themselves and inmates against the effects of chemical agents, and other tactics.

Other qualifications. All institutions require correctional officers to be at least 18 to 21 years of age, be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, and have no felony convictions. Some require previous experience in law enforcement or the military, but college credits can be substituted to fulfill this requirement. Others require demonstration of job stability, usually by accumulating 2 years of work experience, which need not be related to corrections or law enforcement.

Correctional officers must be in good health. Candidates for employment generally are required to meet formal standards of physical fitness, eyesight, and hearing. In addition, many jurisdictions use standard tests to determine applicant suitability to work in a correctional environment. Good judgment and the ability to think and act quickly are indispensable. Applicants



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are typically screened for drug abuse, subject to background checks, and required to pass a written examination.

Advancement. Qualified officers may advance to the position of correctional sergeant. Correctional sergeants supervise correctional officers and usually are responsible for maintaining security and directing the activities of other officers during an assigned shift or in an assigned area. Ambitious and qualified correctional officers can be promoted to supervisory or administrative positions all the way up to warden. Promotion prospects may be enhanced by attending college. Officers sometimes transfer to related jobs, such as probation officer, parole officer, and correctional treatment specialist.

Employment

Correctional officers held about 500,000 jobs in 2006. About 3 of every 5 jobs were in State correctional institutions such as prisons, prison camps, and youth correctional facilities. About 18,000 jobs for correctional officers were in Federal correctional institutions, and about 16,000 jobs were in privately owned and managed prisons.

Most of the remaining jobs were in city and county jails or in other institutions run by local governments. Some 300 of these jails, all of them in urban areas, are large, housing over 1,000 inmates. Most correctional officers employed in jails, however, work in institutions located in rural areas with smaller inmate populations.

Other correctional officers oversee individuals being held by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service pending release or deportation or work for correctional institutions that are run by private, for-profit organizations.

Job Outlook

Employment growth is expected to be faster than the average for all occupations, and job opportunities are expected to be excellent.

Employment change. Employment of correctional officers is expected to grow 16 percent between 2006 and 2016, faster than the average for all occupations. Increasing demand for correctional officers will stem from population growth and rising rates of incarceration. Mandatory sentencing guidelines calling for longer sentences and reduced parole for inmates are a primary reason for historically increasing incarceration rates. Some States are reconsidering mandatory sentencing guidelines because of budgetary constraints, court decisions, and doubts about their effectiveness. Additionally, the Supreme Court recently ruled to make Federal sentencing guidelines voluntary, rather than mandatory, for judges. It is unclear how many States will change their sentencing policies and how long it will be before any changes affect the prison population. Nevertheless, these developments could moderate future increases in the prison population and cause employment of correctional officers to grow more slowly than they have in the past.

Some employment opportunities also will arise in the private sector, as public authorities contract with private companies to provide and staff corrections facilities. Both State and Federal corrections agencies are increasingly using private prisons.

Job prospects. Job opportunities for correctional officers are expected to be excellent. The need to replace correctional officers who transfer to other occupations, retire, or leave the labor

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Correctional officers.....	—	500,000	582,000	82,000	16
First-line supervisors/managers of correctional officers.....	33-1011	40,000	45,000	5,000	13
Bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers	33-3010	460,000	537,000	77,000	17
Bailiffs.....	33-3011	19,000	21,000	2,100	11
Correctional officers and jailers	33-3012	442,000	516,000	75,000	17

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

force, coupled with rising employment demand, will generate thousands of job openings each year. In the past, some local and State corrections agencies have experienced difficulty in attracting and keeping qualified applicants, largely because of low salaries, shift work, and the concentration of jobs in rural locations. This situation is expected to continue.

Layoffs of correctional officers are rare because of increasing offender populations.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of correctional officers and jailers were \$35,760 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$28,320 and \$46,500. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,600, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$58,580. Median annual earnings in the public sector were \$47,750 in the Federal Government, \$36,140 in State government, and \$34,820 in local government. In the facilities support services industry, where the relatively small number of officers employed by privately operated prisons is classified, median annual earnings were \$25,050.

Median annual earnings of first-line supervisors/managers of correctional officers were \$52,580 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$38,920 and \$67,820. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$33,270, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$81,230. Median annual earnings were \$51,500 in State government and \$52,940 in local government.

Median annual earnings of bailiffs were \$34,210 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,130 and \$48,010. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,390, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$58,270. Median annual earnings were \$30,510 in local government.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the starting salary for Federal correctional officers was \$28,862 a year in 2007. Starting Federal salaries were slightly higher in areas where prevailing local pay levels were higher.

In addition to typical benefits, correctional officers employed in the public sector usually are provided with uniforms or a clothing allowance to purchase their own uniforms. Civil ser-

vice systems or merit boards cover officers employed by the Federal Government and most State governments. Their retirement coverage entitles correctional officers to retire at age 50 after 20 years of service or at any age with 25 years of service.

Related Occupations

A number of options are available to those interested in careers in protective services and security. Security guards and gaming surveillance officers protect people and property against theft, vandalism, illegal entry, and fire. Police and detectives maintain law and order, prevent crime, and arrest offenders. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists monitor and counsel offenders and evaluate their progress in becoming productive members of society.

Sources of Additional Information

Further information about correctional officers is available from:

► American Correctional Association, 206 N. Washington St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314.

Internet: <http://www.aca.org>

► American Jail Association, 1135 Professional Ct., Hagerstown, MD 21740.

Internet: <http://www.corrections.com/aja>

Information on entrance requirements, training, and career opportunities for correctional officers at the Federal level may be obtained from the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Internet: <http://www.bop.gov>

Information on obtaining a position as a correctional officer with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management through USAJOBS, the Federal Government's official employment information system. This resource for locating and applying for job opportunities can be accessed through the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or through an interactive voice response telephone system at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404. These numbers are not tollfree, and charges may result.