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Interpersonal Conflict and Work-Related Stress Among Correctional Officers

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Increasingly, research has been conducted on the penal system, yet few researchers have focused on correctional staff. Due to the nature of their work, correctional officers (COs) experience a high degree of stress that is inmate related, occupational, organizational, and psycho–social. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the work experiences of COs in rural correctional facilities in Alaska and to learn how correctional staff perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. The theoretical framework for this study was Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping. Data were collected using semistructured interviews conducted with 12 participants who were current and former COs. Participants were recruited via a recruitment flyer posted on social media and disseminated by the Alaska Correctional Officer Association and the Alaska Peace Officer Association. The collected data were coded and categorized using Colaizzi's seven-step analysis process. The analysis revealed three main themes: (a) personal characteristics, (b) interpersonal dynamics, and (c) relationship with the administration. The findings of this research indicate that to mitigate interpersonal conflict among COs, the Department of Corrections will need to transform the current work culture, which allows for conflicts to occur. Further, the findings reflect that COs do not feel supported by their administration. Findings from this study have the potential to facilitate positive social change by bringing awareness to the challenges faced by COs, including increased need for transformation in workplace policies, creating an environment free of interpersonal conflict, and decreasing levels of stress experienced by staff.

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Dedication

I dedicate this body of work to the knuckle draggers. To those who serve with honor and distinction. To those away from the spotlight who are keeping us safe from behind fortified prison walls. I hope that my research will give a scholarly voice to all you do. I also hope that my study will help improve your working conditions and job satisfaction.

You are indispensable.

Your safety matters.

Your job matters.

Your lives matter.

Your sacrifice matters.

To all correctional officers, past and present, thank you for your service.

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To my friends, you know who you are, thank you for listening to me, for encouraging me, and for the memes that got me through it when I thought about quitting.

To my brother Bart: Thank you for being you.

To my mom: Thank you for instilling in me the importance of hard work.

To Bill, my brother (in-law), my subject matter expert, and inspiration for this study: Thank you for helping me focus my ideas and for answering my countless questions.

And last but not least, to my husband. Matt, I could not have done it without you. You will never know how much your support means to me. I love you. This is because of you, Babe!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Corrections officers (COs) experience work-related stressors that impact their well-being and quality of life (Jaegers et al., 2020). There are numerous sources of stress for COs, including exposure to violence and traumatic events (Price, 2017), shift work (Ritzman, 2019), issues with leadership and administration (Dollard & Winefield, 1998; Lambert et al., 2016), and role expectations (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Zahlquist et al., 2019). However, one aspect that has not been a significant focus of research is interpersonal conflict among COs (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Ritzman, 2019). Work-related conflict impacts professions or situations where the success of the organization depends on the cohesiveness of the team (De Jong et al., 2016; Rezvani et al., 2019; Rezvani & Khosravi, 2018). This is especially relevant in correctional settings, where COs' safety depends on teamwork.

Researchers have focused on the various factors associated with CO stress, including burnout. One aspect that has not been a significant focus of research is interpersonal conflict among COs (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Ritzman, 2019). The interactive nature of most work environments leads to increased opportunities for interpersonal conflict (Van Thanh, 2016). Work-related conflict impacts all workplaces but is especially evident in environments where consistency and cohesion among team members are directly connected to the success of the organization (Rezvani & Khosravi, 2018).

Prolonged exposure to stress among COs has been associated with cardiovascular disease, increased consumption of alcohol, depression, high rates of injury and illness,

burnout, family problems, inability to carry out duties, and risk of suicide higher than the rest of the general working population (Bezerra et al., 2016; Jaegers et al., 2020; Lambert, Worley, et al., 2017; Martinez-Corts et al., 2015; Viotti, 2016). Adverse effects of stress affect not just staff but the overall functioning of correctional institutions (Armstrong et al., 2015). For example, COs who cannot manage stress may call out from work, creating staffing shortages and hindering the effective functioning of a correctional institution.

In this study, I addressed the gap in the literature by examining how COs mitigate work-related stress. To address this gap, I focused on correctional staff who experience stress due to conflict with coworkers. The data gathered in this study yielded information regarding the work experiences of COs and factors that lead to a hostile work environment in rural correctional facilities. The results of this study may help lead to improvements that management can make to increase job satisfaction and retention rates of COs and increase the availability of services to correctional staff. Nearly 500,000 COs working in jails and correctional facilities throughout the country are tasked with the safekeeping of over 11 million individuals in the penal system each year (Zeng, 2018). Identifying how COs perceive work-related stress to mitigate those factors and maintain the well-being of this population is essential.

Background

The job of a CO is multifaceted and varies by institution. However, all COs work in teams and must be attentive, display self-control, resolve conflicts, negotiate difficult situations, and have a proactive attitude while maintaining safety and security under

threats, aggression, and tension (Bezerra et al., 2016; Burton et al., 2018; Jaegers et al., 2019). COs work in an alienating and demanding environment where they constantly deal with conflict (Armstrong et al., 2015). According to Bezerra et al. (2016), frequent exposure to conflict leads to compounded stress; increased levels of stress lead to isolation, trust issues, and poor coping skills and coping, which are related to burnout. Burnout can be defined as a failure to effectively cope with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The job of a CO is stressful and dangerous, and high levels of stress and burnout are detrimental to the work of COs (Armstrong et al., 2015). When COs are affected, and their well-being is compromised by negative work experiences and stress, the safety of staff and inmates, the institution's security, and the well-being of the community are also compromised.

COs working in Alaska face unique challenges within the correctional system. Rural communities differ from metropolitan areas in their geographic characteristics and the resources available, as well as the stress and stressors experienced by those who work there (Armstrong et al., 2015). Metropolitan areas like Detroit, Michigan, or Cleveland, Ohio, are assumed to have some of the highest crime rates. However, Alaska, a state with the fourth lowest population (World Population Review, 2020), has the highest instances of violent crimes per capita, with a rate of 804.2 per 100,000 residents (Dillinger, 2019); some reports indicate that rate to be 885 per 100,000 residents (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020). With high rates of crime come high rates of incarceration. The prison population in Alaska has remained steady at around 4,500 since 2015 (Alaska Criminal Justice Commission, 2019). In 2019, all 12 correctional facilities in Alaska were

operating at near capacity (ACLU of Alaska, 2019; Alaska Criminal Justice Commission, 2019), and only four institutions were considered fully staffed (State of Alaska Department of Corrections, 2020). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020a), employee separations in the field of corrections continue to rise. Some of the challenges to hiring and retaining COs are attributed to the challenging work environment and the dangerous nature of the job (State of Alaska Department of Corrections, 2020).

There are 12 prison facilities and 15 jails across the state of Alaska, housing approximately 4,500 inmates (Alaska Criminal Justice Commission, 2019) staffed by 888 COs, out of 1,694 total staff (State of Alaska Department of Corrections, 2020). Alaska's population is just over 738,000 (World Population Review, 2020); a third of the population lives in rural areas (Rural Health Information Hub, 2020), and 86% of municipalities are not on the road system (Cox, 2017). This causes issues for staff working in remote and off-road locations, such as Anvil Mountain and Yukon-Kuskokwim. COs working in rural areas remain in the immediate area during their workweeks and leave only on their weeks off (CGL Companies, 2016).

Additionally, because staff commute especially to rural areas that often involve multiple flights when COs call out, others are not readily available to fill a post, and prisons face staff shortfalls, increased overtime, and lockdowns (CGL Companies, 2016; Mai & Subramanian, 2017). Traveling is not only difficult as a part of commuting to work but also for training. According to a report by CGL Companies (2016), because travel to headquarters for training is costly and difficult, it is frequently limited, and facilities do not provide needed in-service training.

Problem Statement

Work can be a source of satisfaction but also a source of stress (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). Stress negatively impacts not only the individual but also the organization; yet, dealing with stress is not addressed in law enforcement training, including the CO academy (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Violanti et al., 2017). Most correctional training academies and programs focus on the psychological and physical well-being of the applicants during the initial screening process. COs are prepared for the operational work responsibilities and are taught defense tactics, but their training does not address stress management, forcing COs to manage work-related stress on their own (Armstrong et al., 2015). COs working under extreme stress levels are more likely not to fulfill job responsibilities, including not functioning in a cognitive capacity (Gutshall et al., 2017).

There are numerous sources of stress for COs. COs work in settings that differ from most other professions in that they work in environments surrounded by inmates and threats of violence (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Price, 2017). Because correctional facilities are staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, year-round, COs work 12-hour shifts, nights, weekends, and holidays on a rotating schedule (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Ritzman, 2019; Useche et al., 2019). COs also deal with role ambiguity when there are no clear expectations on work responsibilities (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Zahlquist et al., 2019). COs face conflict with inmates, supervisors, and administration (Dollard & Winefield, 1998; Lambert et al., 2016) and conflict with other COs (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Ritzman, 2019). The social nature of most work environments and the need for multiple daily interactions among staff lead to increased opportunities for interpersonal conflict (Jex,

1998; Van Thanh, 2016; Waters, 1999). Conflict among staff is detrimental to the safety of the officers and the overall functioning of the institution.

Existing research supports the existence of work-related stress, but there is limited research on how correctional staff working in rural, remote, and frontier prisons experience and mitigate stress (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). Further research is warranted to explore how COs experience, negotiate, and manage work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict to address training needs and high rates of burnout and turnover (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). The research problem addressed by this study is that the impact of work-related stress and interpersonal conflict on COs is understudied.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how COs in remote, rural correctional facilities in Alaska perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. If more is known about the experiences of COs, more can be done to address the issues of adverse health outcomes, high suicide rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and high turnover rates of COs working in rural areas.

Research Question

RQ: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers?

Conceptual Framework

The transactional theory of stress and coping (TTSC) provided the theoretical framework for this study. TTSC was initially developed by Lazarus (1966) and later refined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to TTSC, an individual first evaluates

for the risk of stress (primary appraisal), then assesses for coping strategies to manage the stress (secondary appraisal), and finally uses cognitive and behavioral efforts (coping) to manage the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Depending on the nature of the stressor, an individual will select either a problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). What one person perceives as stressful may be seen as positive or challenging to someone else.

The transactional premise of this theory is based on the principle that stress is a product of the relationship between a person and their surroundings. The severity of stress depends on the impact of external stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An individual continuously appraises what happens to them and around them and uses past experiences of stress to evaluate the risk for stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Because appraisal of stress is unique and based on past experiences and individual perceptions, what one individual perceives as stressful, another individual may perceive as positive or even stimulating (Samios & Baran, 2017).

TTSC can be applied to COs' interpretation of work stress, as the theory addresses the imbalance between the individual demands and available resources in a stressful event. In the workplace, stress stems from the interaction of an employee and their work environment (Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Researchers focused on corrections have noted that COs work in dangerous and threatening environments and that COs experience work stress (Armstrong et al., 2015; Jaegers et al., 2020; Lambert, Worley, et al., 2017; Viotti, 2016). Although some COs can manage those stressors, others are impacted by the repeated exposure to stress. Previous researchers have focused on COs

and the outcome of working in a stressful environment but have not addressed how COs experience work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. TTSC focuses on an individual's point of view, evaluating the stress and strategies used to resolve the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). TTSC was used as a guiding principle in this study in understanding how COs responded to a work-related stressor and the development of a positive work environment free of interpersonal conflict and decreasing levels of stress experienced by staff.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a generic qualitative approach, and I relied on semistructured interviews for data collection. Percy et al. (2015) defined generic qualitative inquiry as an in-depth exploration of individuals' beliefs or reflections. The generic approach allows for methodological flexibility and is not restricted by philosophical assumptions of other qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology or grounded theory (Liu, 2016). Unlike phenomenology, which focuses on lived experiences of individuals, the focal point of generic studies is understanding the perceptions of the experiences (Bellamy et al., 2016; Starnino, 2016). Unlike grounded theory, the focus of generic studies is on extracting themes from individuals' experiences rather than developing a theory of explanation (Starnino, 2016). I selected the generic approach because the purpose of my study was to understand the perceptions of COs regarding interpersonal conflict with coworkers and the stress that results from that conflict. This method is consistent with exploring the perceptions of participants' perceptions, and I used a descriptive approach

as my goal was to explore the perceptions of COs relating to interpersonal conflict and stress.

Prior to any data collection, I sought and obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval # 03-19-21-061997) for human subject research. To collect the data, I conducted 12 semistructured interviews of COs who, at the time of the interview, were working or who had retired/separated from correctional facilities in Alaska. I began by using study participants who responded to my recruitment flyer posted on social media (purposive sampling) and subsequently also used snowball sampling by requesting study participants inform other potential participants who may meet the inclusion criteria of the current study (see Griffith et al., 2016). All participants were provided with an informed consent form prior to the interview and were given an opportunity to go over the form and ask any questions about it prior to the beginning of each interview. During the semistructured interviews, I asked the participants to describe their experiences of interpersonal conflict with coworkers while at work. I focused on COs' experiences of stress while on duty and on their accounts of how they mitigated work-related stress that originated from interpersonal conflict. I used semistructured and open-ended questions to guide the discussion and provide flexibility to allow participants to freely discuss their perceptions and elaborate if needed (Janesick, 2016; Kennedy, 2016; Percy et al., 2015).

Definition of Terms

Appraisal process: A cognitive process in which a person evaluates or perceives an event to determine if a threat exists in relation to their well-being (Lazarus &

Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal is a cognitive process in which an individual evaluates if the event is stressful and relevant (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A secondary appraisal is a process in which an individual evaluates how to cope with a stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Burnout: A consequence of prolonged exposure to stress characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, fatigue, cynicism, and feelings of lack of achievement (Jaegers et al., 2019; Useche et al., 2019).

Coping: Involves using behavioral and cognitive processes to reduce stressful events or experiences (Folkman et al., 1986).

Interpersonal conflict: Disagreement between two or more individuals, leading to interfering with another person's efforts at achieving a goal and resulting in negative emotions, discontent, and resentment (Beitler et al., 2018).

Stress: The emotional response to an event or experience. *Job stress* entails a negative experience to a job. *Stress* and *work-related* stress are used interchangeably in this research (Baqutayan, 2015).

Assumptions

In research, assumptions are unavoidable and include aspects of study beyond the direct control of a researcher (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). There were several assumptions important to this study. The first assumption was that study participants would be honest about their experiences. Because I did not interview supervisors or administrators, I had no history of a working relationship with the participants, and I assured confidentiality, I assumed that those safeguards increased participants' honesty.

A second assumption was that if study participants did not want to answer questions, they would let me know. The final assumption was that the interview questions developed for this study were clear and specific to interpersonal conflict and workplace stress in a correctional environment, and the participants would be able to understand each question and provide detailed information.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations in research are the limitations consciously set by a researcher to limit the scope and boundaries of a study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. I focused on COs who, at the time of the interview, were working or who had retired/separated from correctional facilities in Alaska. I set the exclusion criteria to exclude current administrative and supervisory staff because COs in nonsupervisory or administrative positions have more interactions with each other. I chose not to include the supervisory staff due to differences in duties between direct staff and administration and to increase confidentiality and limit the fear of retaliation. The focus of this research was interpersonal conflict among COs; therefore, I did not evaluate conflict between COs and inmates or COs and supervisors. Also, participants were COs currently or formerly working in correctional centers in Alaska. While findings of this study may not be generalizable to all correctional departments, the scope of this study may be used as a sample of insight on how COs experience stress stemming from interpersonal conflict.

I selected TTSC and excluded other possible theoretical frameworks. I explored using the stress-buffering hypothesis, which asserts that a supportive social relationship can alleviate the adverse effects of stress (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985). However, using this theory would have framed the social problem I was exploring differently, which would then require a change in research question and methodology from focusing on COs' perceptions of interpersonal conflict and stress to exploring how social supports mediate experiences of stress. I selected TTSC because of its focus on individual appraisal of stressful experiences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While there is research focusing on stress in COs, limited research exists that focuses on stress in COs stemming from interpersonal conflict.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses and shortcomings of a study outside a researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One limitation of this study was its reliance on participants' perceptions. Researchers note that reliance on perceptions can be a limitation because the differences in individual perceptions may provide variable data (Larsen et al., 2008; Sproull, 2002). Participants might not answer questions truthfully due to fear of retaliation, stigmatization in the workplace, or fear of being portrayed negatively (Navarro-Gonzalez et al., 2016). In order to address these limitations, each participant was provided with and asked to review and sign a consent form, which included information about participants' confidentiality, the importance of the study, and scientific integrity, in an attempt to positively affect the honesty of the interview answers. I also maintained participants' confidentiality during the data collection process.

I used interviews, which are considered a best practice in qualitative research. Interviews, however, have been noted to have limitations, including participants who are difficult to engage in conversation or who may not want to talk about sensitive topics (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). While in-person interviews are the preferred method of data collection in qualitative studies, researchers have found that the use of online teleconferencing interviews in qualitative interviewing has been more effective than using nonvisual communication methods, such as telephone or email (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Video conferencing software, such as Zoom or Skype, as well as phone interviews, have been found to be an effective tool in qualitative research, especially when conducting research on sensitive topics (Gray et al., 2020; Irani, 2019; Jenner & Myers, 2018; Krouwel et al., 2019). Additionally, conducting interviews in the participants' location of choice is considered "innately more relaxing," especially when discussing sensitive topics (Krouwel et al., 2019). My research focused on conflict and work, which can be considered a sensitive topic, especially for current COs. Participants in this research used video conference software or phones and participated from their home environments. I assumed that giving the participants' choice of technology model increased their ability to build rapport with me and allowed them to be more comfortable when discussing their personal experiences and provide honest and truthful interview answers. Ciuk and Latusek (2018) noted that establishing a relationship with participants elicits more honest answers and richer data. To establish rapport with the participants, I started each interview by asking general background questions about the participants' work responsibilities and general demographic questions.

Another limitation lies in the sampling method. Purposeful and snowball sampling are methods used to identify potential study participants (Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016; Naderifar et al., 2017). These sampling methods may limit the participants' variability and may affect the generalizability of the study (Naderifar et al., 2017). However, the intentional selection of study participants is warranted when research questions can be answered by those with a particular experience (Johnson et al., 2019; Palinkas et al., 2015). The purpose of this research was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. These experiences are specific only to COs working in rural areas; therefore, only COs in those regions, specifically in Alaska, were deliberately selected to participate and assist with addressing the research question (see Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016).

Tied to the sampling method is a small sample size, which is a potential limitation in terms of transferability. I planned to recruit 10–15 study participants and interviewed 12. Guest et al. (2006) recommended a sample of six to 12 for interview-based qualitative studies. Other researchers have suggested a sample size between three and 16 participants (Malterud et al., 2016; Sykes et al., 2018). Bellamy et al. (2016) and Mason (2010) noted that data saturation is reached when no new themes emerge and when a researcher determines they have collected enough data. Data saturation occurs when no new themes are revealed, and no additional interviews or sampling are needed (Bellamy et al., 2016). I implemented data saturation as a guiding principle in my research and continued with data collection until no new themes emerged from the interviews. I reached data

saturation with 12 interviews. While the relatively limited number of participants in my study limits its generalizability, the small sample size was intentional as it allowed for the collection of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973, 1993) of perceptions and experiences of COs.

The final potential limitation is research bias. Research bias is a limitation of all interview-based research designs. Johnson et al. (2019) noted that a study's conceptual framework is critical to limiting research bias. I took detailed field notes, which is an effective method for minimizing research bias and also as a means to increase the transparency of the research process (see Carcary, 2009; Johnson et al., 2019). I also kept detailed notes and a journal of my opinions and thoughts during my research process.

Significance of the Study

Given the challenges posed by work stressors and the institutional environment of corrections, more information on correctional staff's well-being can help with prison reform. This study's results may improve the workplace experiences for COs and law enforcement agencies (including corrections) by offering employee assistance and peer support programs. These results may also be used to enhance and promote services offered, aid in developing wellness programs aimed at COs, and contribute to identifying solutions for job stress and promoting more effective management of interpersonal conflict. Finally, correction leadership can use the research results to identify best practices and offer guidance or implement changes related to officer safety and wellness.

Implications for Social Change

Research relevant to CO stress indicates that prolonged exposure to stress is detrimental to COs' health and well-being (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Trounson et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016). Work-related stress in COs has been linked to cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, obesity, increased consumption of alcohol, and a high risk of injury (Ballin et al., 2021; Regehr et al., 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2020; Viotti, 2016). COs also experience a high prevalence of mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), high rates of injury and illness, and increased risk of suicide (Carleton et al., 2018; Jaegers et al., 2020; Ricciardelli, Carleton et al., 2020).

Adverse effects of stress are also linked to the overall functioning of correctional institutions (Armstrong et al., 2015). Prolonged exposure to stress has been linked to burnout, work-related violence, and staffing shortages, as COs who are unable to manage stress may miss work, creating staffing shortages and hindering the effective functioning of a correctional institution (Griffin et al., 2016; Kinman et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016). In addition, the negative effects of work-related stress continue after a CO leaves the workplace; according to Deamicis (2016), the life expectancy of a CO is only about 18 months after retirement.

If more is known about how correctional staff members negotiate and manage work-related stress, more can be done to address the issue and make improvements to the well-being of COs and the overall functioning of correctional institutions. COs need to be able to manage their stress effectively. High levels of stress and burnout are detrimental

to the work of COs. When COs are compromised by negative work experiences and stress, the safety of staff and inmates, the institution's security, and the well-being of the community are compromised (Bhui et al., 2016; Ferdik & Smith, 2017). This research can facilitate positive social change within the correctional culture by pointing out the need for continued stress management training for COs and the necessity for policies and practices to reduce stress levels experienced by staff by facilitating a work environment free of interpersonal conflict.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. I used a generic qualitative approach to structure the research, collect data, and answer the research question: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers?

Correctional staff are a critical resource in a correctional facility (Lambert, Minor, et al., 2015), and much research has been done on corrections and penal theory; however, few scholars have focused on correctional staff. COs are depicted as guards of the offenders, but a CO's role is much more complicated. COs are not considered in the "human service profession" (Burton et al., 2018, p. 34); nonetheless, they play a key role in rehabilitating offenders, and they spend more time with inmates than any other correctional staff (Johnson et al., 2017). The rehabilitation area is absent in officer training. Typical training focuses on inmate management, security skills, and custodial tasks, such as contraband searches, use of force, counting inmates, and grievance

procedures (Burton et al., 2018). Training is essential, as COs who have been successfully taught skills can effectively manage the job demands (Armstrong et al., 2015). Also, COs who have been effectively trained tend to report having higher job satisfaction.

In this chapter, I introduced this generic qualitative study. I provided a background of the study; discussed the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions; and went over a theoretical framework, scope and limitations, and significance of the research. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

COs are surrounded by a prison culture where violence or threats of violence are used as a means of resolving conflict (Demleitner et al., 2018). COs are not only subjected to harassment and bullying from inmates, but they also face similar negative interactions with their coworkers (Ritzman, 2019). Prolonged exposure to stress has numerous negative consequences and often results in poor health conditions, burnout, work-related violence, and sometimes death (Griffin et al., 2016; Kinman et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016). The life expectancy of a CO is about 58 years and only about 18 months after retirement (Deamicis, 2016). COs experience high blood pressure, high heart disease rates, diabetes, alcohol abuse, and PTSD at rates higher than veterans (Regehr et al., 2019; Viotti, 2016).

High levels of stress and burnout are detrimental to the work of COs. When COs are compromised by negative work experiences and stress, the safety of staff and inmates, the institution's security, and the well-being of the community are also compromised (Bhui et al., 2016; Ferdik & Smith, 2017). As several researchers (Butler et al., 2019; Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Harizanova et al., 2018) have noted, limited research exists on how correctional staff negotiates and manage work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. Although COs are taught mechanisms for resolving disputes among prisoners, they are not skilled in resolving interpersonal conflict arising among COs (Edgar, 2015; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015), and work-related interpersonal conflict can be expensive. A federal prison in Florida paid a $20 million settlement to 524 current and former female staff members who filed a lawsuit claiming they were sexually

harassed and threatened with sexual violence by prisoners; prison officials failed to address the allegations and discouraged future reports of similar claims (Keefe, 2017; Kozlowska, 2017). In 2018, a female CO in New Jersey was awarded $316,875 in punitive damages following claims of emotional distress and a hostile work environment after she reported a superior abandoned his post (Avilucea, 2018). In 2019, a former female employee of the Idaho Department of Corrections was awarded $300,000 following a lawsuit claiming sexual harassment and a hostile work environment (Clarke, 2019).

This chapter includes literature search strategies I used to provide evidence supporting the need for my study. I begin by discussing the literature search strategy and conceptual framework of the study. I then review research relating to causes of occupational stress, including violence, shift work, and problems with administration/supervisor, role confusion, and interpersonal conflict in COs. In the last section, I conclude with a summary of the main themes in the literature.

Literature Search Strategy

I implemented a search strategy with keywords relevant to the research using Walden University library's databases (Academic Search Complete, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Justice Periodical, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, PsycInfo ProQuest Central, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Premier, and SocINDEX). The databases were the primary sources for collecting scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. To identify studies relative to the topic, I focused on selecting publications that dealt primarily with stress and interpersonal conflict in COs. Keyword searches consisted of

the following terms and phrases: *corrections officer, correctional officer, correctional officer stress, correctional officer conflict, correctional officer bullying, conflict in corrections, workplace bullying in corrections, interpersonal conflict in corrections, work-related stress, stress and burnout, corrections occupational stress,* and *transactional theory of stress*. Once a gap in the literature was identified, the search was expanded to include other categories, including *correctional officer conflict*, *workplace bullying in corrections,* and *transactional theory of stress*, refining the search to incorporate the study's interpersonal context.

Several areas are addressed in the literature review to develop an understanding of stress and interpersonal conflict in COs. From these areas, the search terms *work-related stress, stress and burnout, correctional occupational stress,* and *correctional officer stress* were used as broad categories for the initial literature search. Information was also retrieved from the websites of the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission, the National Institute of Corrections, the State of Alaska Department of Corrections, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Department of Justice. As a result of this search, a vast array of literature was collected for evaluation. While I focused on locating articles published within the past 5 years, I occasionally used scholarly articles that were over 5 years old, as they added historical viewpoints.

Theoretical Foundation

I relied on the TTSC to examine COs' perceptions of interpersonal conflict and work-related stress. According to TTSC, stress is the result of an individual's understanding (appraisal) of the environmental demands (stressors; Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). When faced with a potentially stressful situation, an individual first engages in a primary appraisal to determine if the event is a threat and, during a secondary appraisal, evaluates coping mechanisms to mitigate it (Baqutayan, 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The cognitive process of appraisal is based on the individual's experiences and perceptions of a stressful event. Even individuals facing identical situations can view and experience stress differently (Samios & Baran, 2017; Wethington et al., 2015).

COs continuously engage in an appraisal process to assess the intensity of each environmental demand and evaluate how to handle each stressful situation while at work. One environmental stressor is a critical incident. A critical incident is an event resulting in "unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later" (Mitchell, 1983, p. 36). Critical incidents in corrections are any events that disrupt the functioning of the facility.

How COs experience environmental stressors depends on each individual's perception and coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cohen et al. (2019) noted that constant exposure to stress can lead to increased cortisol levels involved in the body's fight-or-flight response and creates a state of hypervigilance even after a stressful incident has ended. Anderson et al. (2002) found that police officers' heart rates are "nine beats per minute higher than those who did not experience a critical incident" (p. 414). Klimley et al. (2018) indicated that behaviors such as avoidance or hyperarousal tend to be brought on by a depressing event, such as death, while psychological distress, such as anxiety or unsatisfactory work performance, tend the be the result of more routine

occupational stressors. This supports the notion that different events result in different symptoms and that every CO has a different response to a situation.

Stress is not a new subject. Aristotle, Plato, and Hippocrates were aware of stress and its adverse effects (Fink, 2017). Cannon (1929) introduced the term *fight or flight* to describe animals' response to threats; that term has come to be known as an acute stress response (Fink, 2017). Selye (1975) subsequently recognized the fight-or-flight response as a universal stress response among many living organisms and noted that *stress* is a shortened version of a Middle English word *distress* dating back to the 1300s (Fink, 2017). Finally, Lazarus (1966, 2000, 2006a, 2006b) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized the importance of cognition in stress.

Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

TTSC was first introduced by Lazarus (1966) and then refined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to the TTSC model, stress is a continuous process of appraising the perceived stress and evaluating available problem-solving or coping strategies to mitigate and manage it (Folkman et al., 1986). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) theorized that stress occurs in the relationship between an individual and their environment. The process begins with a stressor, which can be any real or imagined event, situation, or stimulus that initiates a stress response process within an individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1986).

The stress response can be physiological or psychological (Godoy et al., 2018). Physiological responses include increased cardiovascular circulation, increased adrenaline, glucocorticoids, and immune system changes, while psychological responses

generally involve different neuronal networks and may include reactions such as anxiety, anger, or depression (Godoy et al., 2018). When faced with a stressor, an individual engages in an appraisal process known as the primary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Primary appraisal is the individuals' initial evaluation of the event or situation as harmful or threatening. At this stage, a person attributes meaning to a specific individual–environment transaction and decides the importance of the transaction on their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The transaction can be deemed as positive, irrelevant, or stressful. If the transaction is determined to be stressful, the secondary appraisal is used to evaluate the effectiveness of available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). During the secondary appraisal process, an individual further evaluates the situation as one that can produce significant harm, be potentially threatening, or pose a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Transactions evaluated as threatening or harmful provoke negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, or fear. If an individual deems the stressor to be a threat or impending harm, the individuals then engage in an attempt to directly address the stressor through coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Levi, 1987). Coping combines both cognitive and behavioral responses to stress. This process of adaptation to a stressful situation requires the ability to assess the situation and develop coping strategies. Coping strategies can be categorized as emotion or problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Emotion-focused coping strategies are directed at changing emotional responses and reducing negative feelings (such as anxiety or depression) resulting from a stressor (Lazarus &

Folkman, 1987). Problem-focused coping strategies are aimed at directly changing the stressor.

Coping also requires an individual to possess the ability to modify the coping efforts as needed, known as *coping flexibility* (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping flexibility promotes psychological adjustment to stressful life changes and is crucial, particularly to those continuously exposed to stress. If the initial encounter continues to result in distress or negative feelings, those experiences are considered unresolved and result in more distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As a result, the individual engages in reappraisal and considers other coping options to resolve the stressor.

TTSC and Occupational Stress

In the context of work-related stress, TTSC can be used to examine the relationship between employees and their work environment. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined *occupational stress* as the relationship between an individual and their work environment that may result in physical or psychological complications. All components of stress should be considered; "it is not the person or the work environment alone that is responsible for stress and distress in organizational settings, but the functional juxtaposition of both" (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001, p. 46). Research focusing on stress in COs is essential for clinical implications and interventions and exploring the effects stressful work conditions have on individuals. Work-related stress is dangerous in any occupation (Farnacio et al., 2017) and is also expensive. The cost of care related to occupational stress across industries in the United States is approximately

$190 billion (Hassard et al., 2018). Chronic exposure to stress results in physical and mental health problems, work-related violence, and at times reduced life expectancy (Deamicis, 2016; Griffin et al., 2016; Kinman et al., 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b).

TTSC is well suited to examine stress in COs because its premise is that it is transactional, dynamic; involves an individualized, situation-specific process of experiencing stress; and considers the relationship an individual has with their surroundings (Folkman et al., 1986). Numerous scholars have used the TTSC model to examine appraisal and coping. Elias and Haj-Yahia (2016) used TTSC to explore the coping strategies of therapists treating sex offenders. Hawken et al. (2018) and Morimoto et al. (2019) used TTSC to analyze coping in caregivers. Muigai et al. (2018) evaluated occupational stress in prison staff through the lens of TTSC. Mao et al. (2019) examined workplace mistreatment using TTSC and found that workplace support reduces negative staff behaviors. Mackey et al. (2017) used TTSC to explain how an ability to make sense of demands allows employees to neutralize an adverse work environment. Li et al. (2018) explored the appraisal process and worker performance. Herschcovis et al. (2018) drew on TTSC to investigate coping mechanisms used to manage work stress.

Applied to the phenomenon of interpersonal conflict, TTSC can be used to explore the experience of conflict, which differs depending on the individual perception of interpersonal discord. How individuals view stressors depends on their perceptions and coping skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is a cognitive appraisal process during which a person determines if they can effectively deal with the stressor or suffer

unwanted consequences (Baqutayan, 2015). COs experience various occupational stressors, including inmate aggression, understaffing and overcrowding, role ambiguity, and interpersonal conflict (Kinman et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2018; Ritzman, 2019; Viotti, 2016).

Literature Review

Sources of Occupational Stress

Organizational stress exists in any work environment. Factors causing stress in the workplace are essential for research because knowledge of these factors may help eliminate stressful situations, increase staff efficiency, and minimize psychological and physiological loss of personnel (Acquadro Maran et al., 2018; Harrison & Stephens, 2019). Occupational stress is the cause of many diseases and has a significant impact on human health (Foy et al., 2019). Health is one of the conditions of success in any activity. Individuals spend a large portion of their life at work; their quality of life is codependent on the level of occupational stress.

The responsibilities of COs and the prison environment are unique: Few other organizations outside of the justice system are involved with housing and managing violent and uncooperative individuals (Lambert, Griffin, et al., 2015). COs are responsible for operating and safely maintaining correctional facilities (Lambert, Minor et al., 2015). The workplace is where individuals spend a large part of their adult life, which is the primary source of stress (Krause et al., 2015). Work-related or occupational stress stems from the interaction of an employee and their work environment. Stressful situations can be viewed either as positive and promoting achievement or negative and

results in feelings of tension, anxiety, worry, emotional exhaustion, and absenteeism (Cullen et al., 1985; Levi, 1987; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015; Trounson, Pfeifer, et al., 2019). Although moderate levels of stress can typically be managed, excessive exposure to stress results in acute physical (i.e., high blood pressure, fatigue) and emotional (i.e., anxiety) reactions (Bezerra et al., 2016; Selye, 1975).

Like stress, burnout affects people's physical and mental health, especially in vulnerable occupational groups, such as COs (Useche et al., 2019). Researchers have recognized burnout as a response to chronic work-related stressors and are characterized as emotional exhaustion (chronic fatigue or stress), depersonalization, and cynicism (negative interactions with others), and reduction in the perception of professional accomplishment (Useche et al., 2019). Burnout can affect all prison staff (Malkina-Pykh, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2016), and it has been associated with high turnover, absenteeism, and lack of productivity. Additionally, burnout is a significant predictor of PTSD in correctional staff (Jaegers et al., 2019).

Individual and environmental influences, including job demands, social support, safety risks, and conflict, contribute to work stress (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). Job stress is a predictor of turnover, turnover intent, and job dissatisfaction (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). In a correctional setting, organizational stressors are magnified and include exposure to trauma, role conflict, and problematic social interactions. Interpersonal demands, including group pressures, leadership, and interpersonal conflict, contribute to organizational stress (Denhof et al., 2014; Klofas, 1987).

Violence and Traumatic Events

Trauma exposure in COs has not been as widely researched as trauma in first responders, such as police, emergency, or medical staff; however, COs are faced with traumatic stressors daily, partially due to the confined workspace, but also due to daily interactions with incarcerated individuals (Price, 2017; Ricciardelli & Power, 2020).

Trauma can be divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary, trauma involves direct, firsthand experience, for example, being assaulted or witnessing someone being assaulted (Denhof et al., 2014; Torres, 2020). Secondary trauma is a result of indirect exposure to trauma (Malkina-Pykh, 2017; Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). For COs, this can include encountering an inmate who was sexually assaulted, attempted or completed suicide, receiving threats, or being injured (James & Todak, 2018). Repeated exposure to trauma has compounding effects. Studies of long-term trauma and subsequent posttraumatic stress reactions such as hypervigilance and constant state of paranoia lead to increased substance abuse, depression, high rates of injury and illness, decreased performance, increased health risks, family problems, and risk of suicide (Bezerra et al., 2016; Lambert, Hogan, et al., 2017; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016).

Increased exposure to trauma leads to an increased risk of PTSD because trauma "can cause actual damage to the brain" (Martin & Martin, 2017, p. 33). Rates of PTSD of the general population are approximately 7-8%. Those rates in Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are between 11-20%, and about 30% in Vietnam veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018). COs are exposed to both types of trauma; they are at constant

risk of being insured. Between 43-64% of COs meet the criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD (Denhof & Spinaris, 2016). As a result, COs have one of the highest rates of occupational injury and illness, and the second-highest mortality rates and suicide rates related to PTSD are 39% higher in COs than in any other profession (Denhof & Spinaris, 2016).

Trauma is not caused by stress (Martin & Martin, 2017). Stress is typically generated as a response to a situation (Selye, 1975), but stress can also be generated in anticipation of an event or stressor (Cassidy, 2001; Neubauer et al., 2018). COs enter a state of stress before reaching the inmates (Denhof & Spinaris, 2016). At the beginning of each shift, COs arrive at a contained, cold, and barren building with little view of the outside. They are searched for contraband and are restricted from bringing personal items, such as phones, into the facility (Chamberlain & Hompe, 2020; Picincu, 2019). They may be required to work in extreme isolation (security tower) or highly populated areas (intake unit) and spend their shifts in harsh conditions, isolated from other staff, and subjected to low light and air quality (Russo, 2019). Paoline et al. (2006) noted, "Correctional employees are as much imprisoned as their captives, and a very real pain of that imprisonment is interaction with less than desirable persons" (p. 54). COs are surrounded by aggressive, violent, dangerous, manipulative, frustrated, and bored inmates, and there are very few places where there is no direct inmate contact (Lambert, Hogan, et al., 2009; Nwidag et al., 2015). Although individually, each of these may not be stress-inducing, the combined effect of regular exposure can be stressful. El Sayed et al. (2019) noted that dangerous occupations, including law enforcement, cause a constant

state of anticipation. COs anticipate what could go wrong and try to mitigate the risk of something going wrong, and they remain in this heightened state of awareness throughout their entire shift (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Useche et al., 2019).

COs are outnumbered, unarmed, and surrounded by a prison culture where violence or threats of violence are used as a means of resolving conflict (Demleitner et al., 2018). Those conditions are further compounded by harassment, bullying, or other negative interactions with inmates or staff (Ritzman, 2019). According to Bezerra et al. (2016), increased conflict leads to compounded stress, and increased levels of stress lead to isolation, trust issues, and poor coping skills. Given the lack of emphasis on mental health in corrections work culture, it is likely that COs spend years, if not entire careers, without acknowledging, understanding, or processing the trauma they experience and its effects on their lives.

Shift Work

Correctional facilities are staffed 24/7, 365 days a year, to maintain the necessary surveillance. To do that, COs typically work week-long 12-hour day shifts and work weekends, nights, and holidays on a rotating schedule. Rotating schedules are defined as a change from day to evening or night shift (Ritzman, 2019) and mean that COs are awake and alert when they would ordinarily be sleeping (James, Honn et al., 2017). Typical human activities are regulated by a 24-hour circadian cycle, including heightened alertness during the day and reduced alertness at night. Day shift work allows COs to function in harmony with the environmental light/dark cycle, allowing for the night's sleep cycle (James, Honn et al., 2017). Working night shifts or rotating shifts means that

individuals need to adjust and modify their sleep schedules from nighttime to daytime, creating a circadian misalignment (Palanci et al., 2020). Circadian misalignment has both short-term and long-term adverse outcomes associated with mental health, metabolic health, cancer, and heart health (James, Todak et al., 2017). Shift work is often viewed as a burden and has been linked to turnover, excessive sick time, absenteeism causing a deficit in qualified staff at correctional facilities and increased over time as another staff is asked to fill in (Lambert, Minor, et al., 2015; Ricciardelli, Carleton et al., 2020; Ricciardelli & Power, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b).

Leadership and Administration

CO's job satisfaction is directly related to positions with "low demand and high control" (Dollard & Winefield, 1998, p. 264). COs' job satisfaction depends on discipline and control over the inmates, but it also depends on their supervisors' discipline and control (Sygit-Kowalska et al., 2019). Dollard and Winefield (1998) found that individuals in positions of control and decision-making authority report having the lowest emotional and physical stressors and high job satisfaction levels. The job requirements of a CO are the opposite: low control and high demand. Autonomy and control are directly related to employee satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2016; Schiff & Leip, 2019). When COs have control over how they perform their work, they report higher job satisfaction. COs have limited decision-making powers: inmates showers, mealtimes, and recreational time takes place at a well-established time and is well documented. The administration addresses inmate infractions: COs only carry out the messages.

Administrative support, however, is essential to the psychological health and wellbeing of staff (Butler et al., 2019). Poor communication with administration leads to disdain, while lack of guidance, leadership, and training increases injuries. To protect themselves and the inmates, COs require support and supervision (Kinman et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2006). However, without adequate training, skills, and administrative support, COs begin to experience a lack of professional confidence, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Lambert, Barton-Bellessa, et al., 2015). The cumulative effect of these environmental differences plays a vital role in employees' morale and attitude.

Role-Related Stress

Every person occupies several roles simultaneously, which creates a potential for role conflict when fulfilling incompatible role expectations. Role conflict or role ambiguity is prevalent in the workplace and is defined as the lack of clarity regarding expectations (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Jin et al., 2018; Kahn et al., 1964; Zahlquist et al., 2019). Role ambiguity has been found to be a predictor of burnout and work-related stress (Kahn et al., 1964; Suprasto et al., 2017). Work-related role stress is the stress individuals experience due to their occupation and can be defined as either role ambiguity or role conflict (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Ritzer (1977) noted that individuals in high positions are less frequently subjected to conflicting expectations when compared to midlevel professional staff because those in professional level positions typically have clearly defined roles and responsibilities; for example, prison wardens and prisoners have fewer conflicts than COs. COs have to deal

with conflicting expectations placed on them; they are not allowed to interact with inmates; yet, they need to engage with inmates and maintain a working relationship to maintain a peaceful work environment. Such conflicting expectations frequently result in uncertainly regarding goals, responsibilities, authority, and job expectations, which leads to high levels of frustration and strain, and in turn, reduces effectiveness and job satisfaction (Jin et al., 2018; Lambert et al., 2018). Role conflict occurs when contradictory expectations are put on staff and are defined as "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more incompatible sets of pressures regarding the role of occupant's expected behavior" (Shamir & Drory, 1982, p. 81). In a correctional facility, often multiple goals and job expectations are not clear and congruent, causing confusion in staff, resulting in frustration and dissatisfaction (Jin et al., 2018). For example, COs are expected to monitor staff at mealtime and perform cell searches, requiring them to be in two places simultaneously.

To be effective, COs receive training; however, that same training that helps them at work may be counterproductive to positive home life; COs are trained to adhere to a routine and to be suspicious of inmate behavior, but that behavior does not translate well to a life outside of work. Lambert, Minor et al. (2015) found a correlation between work-family conflicts and organizational commitment. Lambert, Minor et al. (2015) defined organizational commitment as a relationship between the employee and their workplace and defines affective organizational commitment as a positive relationship between the employee and their organization; this occurs when employees feel loyalty to their organization. On the other hand, continuous organizational commitment occurs when the

employer feels committed to their work out of obligation. Lambert, Hogan, et al. (2017) found that those with high continuance organizational commitment also had higher work-family levels.

One of the sources of family conflict is attributed to CO's personality changes. Human personality affects coping (Leszko et al., 2020). Individuals respond to stress by engaging in behaviors to decrease experiencing unpleasant emotions (Hirokawa et al., 2015). Careers in law enforcement attract individuals with similar personalities, appreciate order, structure, ethics, and control (Detrick et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2016; Lyutykh & Konopleva, 2016). COs struggle to be effective correctional officers and the requirement to be useful in family life. COs are exposed to stress and stressful work conditions (Sygit-Kowalska et al., 2019), develop rigidity, inability to break the routine, and a continued need to maintain order and control. Such conflicting feelings experienced by COs may be contributing to the high levels of stress.

Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict is a broad term related to negative interpersonal encounters or disagreements between individuals in a group setting, often characterized by hostility or aggression (Anicich et al., 2015; Jex, 1998; Sharma & Singh, 2019). In the workplace, interpersonal conflict is defined as a disagreement between two or more employees based on opposing views regarding job responsibilities (Prause & Mujtaba, 2015). Interpersonal conflict is a significant problem in the workplace. On a micro level, employees involved in a work-related conflict report having negative emotions, increased rates of cardiovascular disease, and experiencing physical distress (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013;

Zajacova & Montez, 2017). On a macrolevel, interpersonal conflict at work is directly related to decreased job satisfaction, high turnover and absenteeism, lower organizational commitment, decreased productivity, and increased stress (Kahn et al., 1964; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Notelaers et al., 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2019; Van Thanh, 2016; Waters, 1999).

Conflict in corrections has been studied primarily as an issue related to inmates (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017) or in terms of job satisfaction (Lombardo, 1981). However, Ritzman (2019) and Ferdik and Smith (2017) noted that interpersonal conflict between correctional staff is a significant stress source for COs. Conflict among correctional staff creates additional stress and results in continuous stress exposure, which further compounds the issue and creates a sense of normalcy in an unhealthy, high-risk work environment. Sources of peer conflict in COs include COs working against one another rather than offering each other assistance (Lombardo, 1981), officers viewing their coworkers as a source of stress (Finn, 1998), and stress stemming from conflict with supervisors (Matterson & Ivancevich, 1982). A pleasant work environment results in positive psychological feelings, while poor connections with coworkers create an isolating work experience, increasing adverse work outcomes (Lambert et al., 2016). Viotti (2016) related interpersonal relationships between COs to work-related stress and identified conflict, gossip, and being accepted or excluded from the close-knit groups as sources. On the other hand, Ritzman (2019) linked work-related stress to harassment, bullying, or other negative interactions with inmates or staff.

Historically, research regarding conflict or harassment in a correctional setting focused on female correctional officers (Cassirer & Reskin, 2000; McMahon, 1999; Rader, 2005; Zimmer, 1986). More recently, however, researchers have focused on the overall prevalence of conflict and workplace bullying in a correctional setting (Brewer & Whiteside, 2012; Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Ritzman, 2016, 2019). Bullying and harassment are often used interchangeably; however, they are defined as separate instances of conflict for the purposes of this study. Bullying is defined "as a systematic and repeated action of harassing, offending and socially excluding an individual with the main consequences of negatively affecting his/her job performance and jeopardizing his/her health" (Guglielmi et al., 2018, p. 511). Harassment is "unwanted conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information" (para 2), according to the guidance issued by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021) is There are long-lasting effects of workplace bullying and harassment. Employees who believe they are targeted by others report affected sleep, physical and mental health, and diminished work performance (Ritzman, 2019).

A dysfunctional prison culture results in a dysfunctional workplace (Denhof et al., 2014). COs need to be able to rely on each other for personal safety, as trust is paramount to physical safety, especially when responding to critical incidents. However, according to Worley et al. (2017), staff in dangerous occupations or staff that are stressed out due to work-related issues are more likely to distrust their coworkers. Positive work relationships not only lead to a safer work environment and happier employees but also

promote fewer instances of staff engaging in illicit behaviors (Worley et al., 2017). Researchers have found that positive workplace relationships are more correlated to stress than support from family or friends (Cullen et al., 1985; Wolniak & Szromek, 2020). Positive peer relationships and peer support have also been found to be the most effective protective factor against stress and PTSD (Klimley et al., 2018).

Summary and Conclusion

A significant amount of research and literature focusing on stress in correctional research exists. Scholars, such as Bezerra et al. (2016), continued to show that COs work in a highly stressful environment, surrounded by stress and conflict. There are approximately 2.4 million offenders housed in jails and prisons across the country on any given day, and they are supervised by 428,870 correctional staff (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b).

Based on a review of the current literature, there is a limited understanding of interpersonal conflict's effects on correctional officers' stress. Much of the existing research regarding stress in COs focuses on environmental stressors and demands that staff needs to manage. A protective component found in numerous studies indicates that proper training, resources, involved leadership, and positive reinforcement have a constructive effect on staff (Lugo, 2016). Similarly, Viotti (2016) found that having personal resources serves as a buffer for the spillover of interpersonal conflict at work. According to Steiner and Wooldredge (2015), COs who receive more support and have more contact with their coworkers experience lower stress levels. Steiner and Wooldredge suggested increased support for staff, including training targeted at conflict

de-escalation (i.e., team building exercised) and a change in job demands, including clear role expectations.

This study expands existing research by examining CO's experiences with stress and conflict and how they respond to stressful situations and stress. This study also expands existing research using the TTSC model, offering insights into CO's appraisals of stress and coping strategies. Findings from this study will offer the Department of Corrections a better understanding of how COs experience job-related stress will aim to improve training strategies to better prepare COs for the possibility of role and interpersonal conflicts.

The next chapter presents the research approach and design, methodology, and data collection used to complete my study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the work experiences of COs in remote, rural correctional facilities and to learn how they perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. If more is known about the experiences of COs, more can be done to address the issues of adverse health outcomes, high suicide rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and high turnover rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016) of COs working in rural areas.

In Chapter 3, I outline the selected methodology for this study. I discuss my role as the researcher, the methodology, and the research design. I also explain the criteria for participant selection, the interview process, data analysis procedure, a discussion about trustworthiness issues, and I conclude with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I selected generic qualitative research methodology as most appropriate to explore the research question: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers? The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how COs perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. A qualitative research method is most appropriate when the purpose of the study is seeking information about the perspectives, meaning, or experiences of the study participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This methodology aligns with my research's purpose because it is not possible to measure opinions, beliefs, or attitudes using a statistical design (Percy et al., 2015). The goal of qualitative research is to expand knowledge about a phenomenon (Burkholder et al.,

2016). This research will expand the academic literature on how COs mitigate work-related stress.

The generic approach resembles phenomenological design; however, while phenomenology focuses on experiences, the generic approach explores individuals' thoughts and beliefs about a particular issue (Gill, 2000). A phenomenological approach would not be an appropriate method, as the focus of this study was not the lived experiences of the research participants. A generic approach allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' beliefs or reflections (Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). I did not select grounded theory, as the purpose of this research was to explore how COs perceive work-related stress rather than to develop a new theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019). I selected a generic approach as the most appropriate for my study because the goal is to explore the perspectives of the study participants.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Cope, 2015; Orange, 2016), and as such, I functioned as an integral element of the research process. During data collection, I followed a written established interview protocol, accepted information as provided by the participants, and remained focused on the participants' viewports. I also examined how my personal biases may have impacted the data collection process. According to Patton (2020), understanding and managing bias must avoid errors and maintain data validity, and the researcher's pre-existing ideas should not corrupt the newly collected data. To manage bias within the study, I ensured I

was not affiliated with any participants selected to partake in this study, and no prior relationship existed between the participants and me.

I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program Human Subjects Protection Training (Appendix D) to further ensure study participants' safety. I also followed the ethical guidelines and principles noted in the *Belmont Report*, which established a foundation for defining a process to conduct research and highlights justice principles, respect for persons, and beneficence (Miracle, 2016). This process includes providing participants with information about any potential adverse events during or after the study before their participation (Miracle, 2016). A researcher must ensure that participants are treated fairly and that no undue influence impacts their participation (Miracle, 2016; Yip et al., 2016). To comply with these standards, I ensured that participants were provided with timely information to allow for appropriate decision making, treated all participants fairly and respectfully, and maintained the participants' confidentiality. This also allows me to establish a working relationship with the participants.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The purpose of this study was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. This study's subjects were current and former COs working in centers across Alaska. Setia (2016) noted that accessing a homogenous sample of participants provides a more defined understanding of participants' perceptions. A homogenous sample is one in

which the participants have similar characteristics (Alase, 2017), and the main shared characteristic among participants of this study was their history of employment as correctional officers. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to make well-informed selections of specific cases that increase the likelihood of observing the phenomenon being explored and to obtain the greatest understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Liu, 2016; Serra et al., 2018). A recruitment flyer describing the study was posted on social media sites (Facebook and Linked In) as well as disseminated by the Alaska Correctional Officer Association (ACOA) and the Alaska Peace Officer Association (APOA).

Sample Size

Any qualitative researcher aims to understand a specific phenomenon rather than gain a broad superficial explanation of a large population sample. Although the sample size is essential to ensure a credible content analysis (Elo et al., 2014; Vasileiou et al., 2018), there is no commonly accepted size or a true standard for qualitative studies. The number of participants is reliant on the purpose of the study (Constantinou et al., 2017; Malterud et al., 2016). Information power is used as a guiding principle for estimating an appropriate number of participants for the study; as Elo et al. (2014) noted, the larger the information power the sample holds, the lower the number of participants needed. Research involving interviews requires a smaller sample size and intensive analysis of each case, suggesting a sample size of three to 16 participants may be sufficient (Malterud et al., 2016; Sykes et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

My objective was to recruit between 10 and 15 COs currently working or those who have retired/separated but have worked at correctional facilities in Alaska. Having too few participants can lead to failure to achieve saturation and negatively impact the validity and quality of the research. The final number of participants needed to be adequate to address the research questions and provide sufficient information about the studied phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Criteria for exclusion from this study applied to individuals employed in a correctional facility in a non-custody position and current supervisory and administrative level staff, including lieutenants and superintendents.

Instrumentation

I served as the primary instrument and investigator in the study. The secondary instrument in this study was a semistructured, open-ended interview protocol (Appendix B), which was used for data collection. Semistructured interviews are the recommended data collection method for generic qualitative studies (Roulston, 2018). Semistructured questions give guidance as to topics during the interview but also allow flexibility so that participants can freely discuss their perceptions and elaborate if needed (Janesick, 2016; Kennedy, 2016). Semistructured interview questions allowed me to ask any follow-up questions using "tell me more" phrases as suggested by Percy et al. (2015, p. 79). I developed open-ended, semistructured interview questions (Appendix B) designed to elicit narratives regarding interpersonal conflict, stressful experiences at work. I used the literature review and my conceptual framework as guides. The interview questions were based on the research question and aimed to explore participants' experiences with the phenomenon of interpersonal conflict. Subject matter experts from the field of corrections

and my dissertation committee reviewed all interview questions for scope and alignment with the program statement, research questions, and the study content to ensure content validity (see Pandey & Chawla, 2016). After a few preliminary interviews with former COs, I implemented an initial data analysis to group data and created concepts and to obtain feedback on my interview protocol (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Kirkwood, 2018).

Interviews were used to explore the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees (see McGrath et al., 2018). Interviews were predicted to last an hour. The shortest interview lasted 35 minutes, and the longest lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes. I used a digital recorder to record the interviews. I also took notes during and after the interviews.

Procedures of Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment Procedures

Data collection started following approval from Walden University's IRB. For a period of 4 weeks, a recruitment flyer was posted on social media sites (Facebook, Linked In) inviting COs currently working in correctional centers in Alaska to participate in a study on interpersonal conflict and stress. The flyer, which outlined the purpose of the research, criteria for participation (current COs, excluding supervisory and administrative staff), and my contact information, was posted twice a week, once at the beginning and once at the end of the week, to improve study participant response rates. No current COs responded to the flyer after 4 weeks; however, three former COs reached out expressing interest in participating. Due to lack of interest from current COs but interest from former COs, the scope of the study was revised to include former (retired

and separated COs); the gift card amount for participation was increased from $25 to $50. After a request for change in procedure was granted by IRB, the revised flyer (Appendix A) was once again posted on Facebook and LinkedIn. The flyer was also disseminated by ACOA and APOA. Fourteen prospective participants reached out, expressing interest in participating.

Interested participants contacted me either via phone or email. Those who contacted me via email received a reply email asking for convenient times and methods for the interview (Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime). I also emailed the interested participants the consent form. Those who contacted me via phone were asked for the most convenient method of contact and times for interviews as well as for an email address so that I could send them an informed consent form. No interested participants opted for the consent form to be mailed; all asked that the form be emailed to them.

This research involved purposive and snowball sampling. Snowball or chain-referral sampling starts with a convenience sample and uses the original subject to recruit others (Etikan, Alkassim, et al., 2016; Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016). Participants who returned the consent form and participated in the interview were subsequently asked to refer other current officers to participate. This sampling method is prone to generate a biased sample (Elo et al., 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015) because individuals with common backgrounds and interests tend to refer respondents similar to the initial responder (Etikan, Alkassim, et al., 2016). This method can, however, be effective when it comes to locating hard-to-reach populations. Purposeful sampling increases bias and limits trustworthiness; however, that can be mitigated if full details of sampling are provided

(Elo et al., 2014). Palinkas et al. (2015) suggested using purposeful sampling and focus groups or semistructured interviews to narrow down the participant sample size.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

According to Patino and Ferreira (2018), exclusion criteria are defined as potential study participants who may meet the inclusion criteria but who have other characteristics that make them ineligible to participate in the research and who, if participating, would negatively affect the validity of the study. This study's subjects were COs (CO I, CO II, and CO III non-supervisory) currently and formerly working in centers across Alaska. Excluded were current CO III (supervisory level, lieutenants) and CO IV (superintendent) and any administrative, noncustodial staff, and staff who have been separated from the department.

Individuals who were interested in participating and who contacted me via email received a reply email asking for convenient methods and times for interviews. They were emailed a consent form. Interested participants who contacted me via phone were be asked for convenient interview times and methods of conducting the interview. I offered to send the consent forms to them via email or mail; all opted for the form to be emailed. No interested participants did not meet inclusion criteria. Two candidates expressed interest in participating but never responded after receiving the consent form. Three individuals who were former COs and contacted me prior to a change in the scope of my study did not respond to inquiries to participate. All respondents were thanked for their interest in the study.

Participation Procedures

I scheduled a time to meet with each participant via their preferred contact platform to accommodate their availability and comfort. All participants were offered the option of Skype, Zoom, or FaceTime. One interview took place via Skype video conferencing, two via FaceTime, two via Zoom with video, and two via Zoom without video, as participants were having internet stability issues and opted to have their cameras off. Five interviews took place using a telephone at the request of the participants who noted they would be more comfortable with that method. Prior to each interview, I tested the technology used to ensure it worked appropriately and that I could capture the interview.

I started each interview by going over the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, and potential risks. I discussed the participant's ability to stop and withdraw from the interview at any time. I discussed the consent form and asked if the individual had any questions. I informed each participant that the interview was being audio recorded and asked for verbal consent to audio record the interview. I also informed the participant that I would use handwritten notes in addition to an audio recorder and would maintain each recorded interview in a secure digital folder. I began each interview by asking participants two study inclusion criteria questions, as noted in the interview protocol (Appendix B). To qualify for the study, participants must be either currently working in correctional facilities in Alaska as COs (CO I, CO II, CO III nonsupervisory) or be former COs (separated/retired) from the department. Excluded from the study were current CO level III (supervisory positions), superintendents (CO level IV), any

noncustodial administrative staff, and those who separated from the department. All the participants met the inclusion criteria, and I proceeded with the interview protocol.

I then continue my interviews by asking broad background questions, as suggested by Roberts (2020), to build trust with the participant, as broad questions are typically easier to answer. I used open-ended, semistructured interview questions to collect data.

Debriefing

At the end of each interview, I engaged in debriefing with the participants. As noted by McShane et al. (2015), researchers are obligated to debrief with the study participants. During the debriefing, participants were thanked for taking part in the research and were given an opportunity to withdraw their participation as well as request the results of the study. Participants were also informed about a potential follow-up interview if one is needed to obtain clarifying information and were given an option to decline their participation. I confirmed the current e-mail address for each participant and informed them that I would be e-mailing a transcript of their interview. Each participant was also informed that professional counseling was available if negative or harmful feelings arose from the interview. Finally, all participants were offered a $50 gift card conclusion of their interview. Four participants declined the gift card. The remaining eight were mailed a gift card to an address of their choice or emailed an electronic version of a gift card.

Data Analysis Plan

I recorded and transcribed each interview verbatim. I reviewed the transcribed interviews and the notes I took during the interviews, and I compared them to the audio recording by playing them and reading along for accuracy. I also provided each participant with a transcribed copy of the interview to ensure that I captured their responses as intended. Transcript checking helps to ensure the accuracy of the information (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019).

I used inductive thematic content analysis to code the transcripts. This content analysis method results in organizing data into meaningful categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In the inductive approach, data determine the themes. I followed the coding process outlined by Percy et al. (2015) and the data analysis process outlined by Colaizzi (1978). I began by reading the transcripts and notes and listening to the interviews multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I highlighted phrases or sentences relevant to the research questions and assigned them short codes describing their content. This is also known as open coding or unitizing (Almarzooqi et al., 2016). In qualitative research, codes are used to categorize data similar in meaning, which helps to draw meaning and conclusions (Adu, 2019; Stuckey, 2015). I then reviewed the highlighted data and eliminated coded irrelevant statements or ones that could not be reduced to their possible meaning. I stored the highlighted but not relevant data separately for potential future reevaluation.

Next, I looked for patterns among the created codes and clustered them into groups. This process is also known as axial coding (Saldana, 2016). I compared the

transcripts' common themes to ensure that they were relevant to my research questions. Next, I located verbatim excerpts from the transcribed interview to support the emerging themes. I used verbatim statements to support individual textual descriptions. I used the phenomenon of data saturation, which occurs when no new themes are revealed, and no additional interviews of sampling are needed (Bellamy et al., 2016) as a guiding principle to continue with interviews until data saturation is reached. Hennink et al. (2017) noted that code saturation might be reached as early as after nine interviews; however, meaning saturation is typically accomplished after 16-24 interviews. I named each theme and identified what each theme captures. I conducted a detailed analysis of how each theme is related to other themes and to the research questions. I then described each cluster of themes in detail as those themes reflect the participants' shared experiences and perceptions. Finally, I synthesized the list of codes and the categories of themes into the essence of the phenomenon's experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Qualitative credibility refers to the validity or accuracy of the collected data (Amankwaa, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To ensure credibility, I aimed to align the selected research method and research question, as suggested by Bengtsson (2016). The most effective method to establish credibility is member checking, as it increases the accuracy of data (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). For this study, member checking was done via transcript review. Transcripts were presented to all 12 participants, and each participant was given an opportunity to check them for accuracy and to make any modifications.

Participants were informed that they could decline to participate in this process. Out of the 12, two participants responded with corrections and additional information. Five participants acknowledged receipt of the transcript and offered feedback, and five participants did not respond to the request to review the transcript. I used transcript checking in order to ensure the study's credibility. I kept detailed notes on each of the activities.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results of one research are appliable to other studies (Amankwaa, 2016). Detailed or thick descriptions, transparency, and accurate recording of findings improve the transferability of a study (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). Cypress (2017) noted that a study's transferability could also be improved through purposive sampling. To foster transferability, all data was collected with the purpose that it may support future research and expand the existing literature on the topic of interpersonal conflict and stress in COs. Although this study focuses on rural correctional officers, the transferability of this study's results may have been impacted by the geographic limitations of the study. To address transferability, I used purposive sampling and the provision of sufficient detail in describing the case being explored. I accomplished this by concisely detailing the population being explored, participant selection, and geographic boundaries of the study.

Reliability

Reliability is the equivalent of dependability for qualitative studies. Reliability is the consistency in the data collection process (Bengtsson, 2016). Dependability is

established by maintaining consistent procedures with all study participants and across methods used and requires the researcher to describe all aspects of the study in sufficient detail to allow others to replicate it (Constantinou et al., 2017). I ensured my study's dependability by adhering to the same procedures for each participant and interview. I carefully documented my notes, as well member checking and transcript review process and the follow-up in-person interview. Finally, I ensured data saturation by interviewing participants until the research question had been answered and no new themes emerged.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the accuracy of the collected data and others' capacity to collaborate and confirm the results (Amankwaa, 2016). Bengtsson (2016) and Morse (2015) noted that the researcher's preunderstanding of the phenomenon might be evident in the process of planning (question and design) as well as analysis and needs to be addressed. To ensure confirmability, I maintained a research journal to keep my thoughts separate from those of the participants and kept detailed notes to capture any personal views or biases during the interviews. I also ensured that the conclusions for my study were based on the information collected during the interviews.

Ethical Procedures

All participants were informed both verbally and in writing about the study before participating. Prior to beginning the study, I obtained Walden IRB approval. The sample selection criteria were a part of the approval process. Once I received the approval, I began recruitment. Interested participants reached out to me via email and phone, and all were provided informed consent forms via email. Tauri (2017) and Perrault and Nazione

(2016) emphasized the importance of the informed consent process as a part of ensuring that study participants have been provided information regarding the purpose of the study and their role in the process.

Written instructions and informed consent forms were distributed before the interviews. Informed consent forms included information about the ability to withdrawn from the study at any time, outlined the risk of potential feelings of discomfort from answering questions about their work and personal lives, as well as general information about available local mental health services. Participants were asked to return one signed copy of the consent form and to keep the other one for their records. Participants were given the option to respond to the email with the consent form by noting "I consent" in the body of the email. Each respondent was coded as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and so on, and no names were attached to any of the interview data.

Consent forms were separated from the recorded and transcribed interviews and are accessible by the researcher. All information was kept confidential. Transcribed interviews were printed and locked in a filing cabinet, and after 5 years, raw data will be stored electronically and password protected, as well as a hard copy of the transcribed interviews will be destroyed.

Summary

The purpose of this proposed generic qualitative study was to explore and understand the experiences of stress in correctional officers. This chapter detailed the research design and rationale, the researcher's role, methodology, participation selection logic, instrumentation, recruitment, participation, data collection, data analysis, issue of

trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. All steps in the research process took place in line with the Walden University IRB's ethical procedures.

Interpersonal conflict is an essential factor affecting stress in COs. If more is known about the experiences of COs, then more can be done to address the issues of adverse health outcomes, high suicide rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and high turnover rates of COs working in rural areas.

The next chapter begins with a summary of the findings. I then apply the study findings to professional practice and implications for social change and recommendations for actions.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. The study was directed by one research question: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers? This chapter includes a discussion of the data collection analysis as well as the results. Interpretations of the results will appear in Chapter 5.

Setting

This was a generic qualitative study using semistructured interviews guided by a 10-item, open-ended protocol. The participants were current COs (CO I, CO II, and nonsupervisory CO IIIs) or COs who formerly worked in correctional institutions in Alaska. This study focused on current and former COs in Alaska; therefore, one of the inclusion questions asked if the participants were currently working or previously worked in correctional institutions in Alaska. During the interview process, participants were assigned numbers ranging from 1–12, and they were referred to as such throughout the remainder of the study. Confidentiality is an important part of research and one of the ethical challenges when conducting qualitative studies and involves not revealing the identity of the participants (Ngozwana, 2018; Roth & Von Unher, 2018). I ensured the confidentiality of the participants by keeping the names and other identifying information separate from notes and transcribed interviews. I used direct quotes from participants when appropriate. I implemented this because direct quotes allow readers to better connect with the experiences as expressed by the participants and add authenticity to the

data (Lingard, 2019). Data from interviews were kept secure in electronically and password-protected files. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Participants

Approval to begin data collection was granted by Walden University's IRB on March 19, 2021 (approval # 03-19-21-061997). Following the approval, I posted a recruitment flyer on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn). The flyer outlined the purpose of the research, the criteria for participation, and my contact information. The flyer was posted twice a week, once at the beginning and once at the end of the week, to improve study participant response rates. I experienced some difficulty securing participants, despite the fact that my flyer was shared by family and friends employed in the department of corrections in Alaska. After 4 weeks, three former COs reached out expressing interest in participating, but no current COs made contact. Former COs were excluded from the scope of my study at that time.

After being contacted by former COs who noted that current COs would likely not participate unless they were referred by someone they knew, the scope of the study was revised to include former (retired and separated COs). I also increased the gift card amount from $25 to $50. After the request for change in procedure was granted by Walden University's IRB on April 21, 2021, a revised flyer (Appendix A) was once again posted on Facebook and LinkedIn. The flyer was also disseminated by ACOA and APOA. I followed up with the three former COs who originally expressed interest in participating. They did not respond. Fourteen prospective participants reached out, and 12

participated in the interview process. After completing 12 interviews, I determined that I had reached saturation, and the post with my flyer was no longer renewed. The flyer remained posted until May 31, 2021.

Demographics

Fourteen prospective participants reached out to me, expressing interest in participating. Interested participants contacted me via phone or email. Seven interested participants reached out to me via email. Each received a reply email with the consent form. Once I received the consent form, I requested convenient times and methods for the interview (Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime). Of the seven, five responded, expressing interest. Two did not respond after I sent the consent form, despite two follow-up emails. Five prospective participants contacted me via phone. They were asked for a preferred way to receive the consent form (email or mail). All five asked that the consent be emailed. After receiving the consent form, I asked the most convenient method of contact and times for interviews and a convenient method to conduct the interview (Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime). Two individuals contacted me on Facebook. Similarly, they were asked for a preferred way to receive the consent form (email or mail). They, too, asked that the form be emailed. After receiving the consent form, I asked the most convenient method of contact and times for interviews and a convenient method to conduct the interview (Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime).

My objective was to recruit between 10 and 15 COs currently working or those who retired/separated from the department but have worked at correctional facilities in Alaska. At the conclusion of my study, I interviewed 12 COs. Those 12 are considered

participants as they participated in the data collection process. All participants discussed their tenure prior to retirement/separation or, if currently working, how long they have been a CO. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the demographic information of the study participants.

Table 1

Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Tenure (years)	Rank	Status
P1	M	10	CO III	Current
P2	M	21	CO II	Retired
P3	M	17	CO II	Retired
P4	F	8	CO III	Current
P5	M	25	CO II	Retired
P6	M	20	CO II	Retired
P7	M	32	CO III	Retired
P8	M	23	CO II	Retired
P9	M	19	CO II	Retired
P10	M	8	CO II	Separated
P11	M	13	CO II	Current
P12	M	21	CO III	Retired
P13	Unknown	20	Unknown	Retired
P14	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Retired

The tenure of the participants varied from 8 years, for the only participant who left the department voluntarily (separated) and did not retire, to 32 years. The ranks varied from CO II to a nonsupervisory CO III for current COs. Three former COs were CO III shift supervisors. All participants currently are or were working as COs; therefore, I assumed all were over the age of 18. No further identifying information was collected, though some disclosed the name of the facility they worked in or are currently working in and provided their full names.

Data Collection

On March 22, 2021, I posted a recruitment flyer on Facebook and LinkedIn. The flyer included the purpose of my research, the criteria for participation, and my contact information. I posted the flyer twice a week. Friends and family employed with the State of Alaska Department of Corrections also shared my flyer. After 4 weeks, I was contacted by three former COs. No current COs expressed interest in participating. Former COs who contacted me indicated that current COs would not likely want to participate unless they were referred by a familiar person. I then revised the scope of my research to include former COs, including separated and retired COs. I also changed the gift card amount. Walden University's IRB granted a request for a change in procedure. On April 21, 2021, I posted the revised flyer (Appendix A) on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). ACOA and APOA also disseminated the recruitment flyer. I was contacted by the first interested participant on April 28, 2021. The interview period lasted from May 4, 2021, to May 19, 2021. Data collection ended on May 31, 2021.

All participants were given a choice of technology to conduct the interview in hopes the freedom to select a preferred method of participating would increase their ability to build rapport with me and would allow them to be more comfortable when discussing their personal experiences. As a result, one interview took place via Skype video conferencing, two interviews were done via FaceTime, two interviews were completed via Zoom with video, and two interviews via Zoom without video as participants were having internet stability issues and opted to have their cameras off. Five

interviews took place using a telephone at the request of the participants who noted they would be more comfortable with that method.

A total of 12 participants were interviewed in this study. My objective was to recruit between 10 and 15 COs currently working or those who retired/separated but have worked at correctional facilities in Alaska. I used data saturation, which occurs when no new themes are revealed, to determine that no additional interviews were needed (Bellamy et al., 2016). Hennink et al. (2017) noted that code saturation might be reached as early as after nine interviews; however, meaning saturation is typically accomplished after 16–24 interviews.

I used guided semistructured interview questions (Appendix B). As the interviews took place, I asked each participant to elaborate on additional questions that came up during each interview. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked an inclusion criteria question to confirm they qualified for the study. To be included, participants must have been either currently working in correctional facilities in Alaska as COs (CO I, CO II, CO III nonsupervisory) or be former COs (separated/retired) from the department. The inclusion questions were followed by 10 open-ended interview questions that allowed individuals to freely talk about their experiences of stress and conflict while working with the State of Alaska Department of Corrections. Sample questions included the following:

- Tell me about a time when you had a disagreement or conflict with a coworker.
- Were there any activities or thoughts that helped you cope with the stress?

- Other than the event you described, what other kinds of stressors do/did you experience at work?
- How does/did conflict with coworkers affect your job as a CO?

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to talk about any other information that was not covered by the questions or the interview. Participants were also asked if they wanted to participate in the member-checking process. All participants expressed interest in participating in member checking, and all were provided a transcribed copy of the interview; two responded with additional information and comments. One participant opted for an in-person follow-up interview.

Data Analysis

Transcription

I began data analysis by transcribing each of the recorded interviews. I made copies of the audio recordings and began transcribing them using Otter.iu software, which provided me with a rough transcript of each interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I then listened to the recordings and checked the transcribed draft line by line for any misinterpretation of the audio or for inaccuracies. The transcription process allowed me to listen to the recorded interviews numerous times to ensure the transcript accurately captured the interview. To ensure member checking, I provided the final version of the transcribed interview to each participant. I asked each participant to review the transcript to ensure that I captured their responses accurately. Transcript checking helps to ensure the accuracy of the information (Birt et al., 2016;

Candela, 2019). Two participants returned my transcripts with additional and clarifying comments.

Coding

I used manual coding and recoding to identify themes, as noted by Bellamy et al. (2016) and Saldana (2016). I used inductive thematic content analysis to code the transcripts. This content analysis method results in organizing data into meaningful categories (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In the inductive approach, data determine the themes. I followed the coding process outlined by Percy et al. (2015) and the data analysis process outlined by Colaizzi (1978).

I began by reading the transcripts and notes and listening to the interviews multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I highlighted phrases or sentences relevant to the research question and assigned them short codes describing their content. This process is also known as *open coding* (Almarzooqi et al., 2016). I then reviewed the highlighted data and eliminated irrelevant statements or statements that could not be reduced to their possible meaning. I stored the highlighted but not relevant data separately for potential future reevaluation. Next, I looked for patterns among the created codes and clustered them into groups. This process is also known as axial coding (Saldana, 2016). I compared the transcripts' common themes to ensure they were relevant to my research questions. Next, I located verbatim excerpts from the transcribed interviews to support the emerging themes. I used verbatim statements to support individual textual descriptions. I relied on data saturation, which occurs when no new

themes are revealed (Bellamy et al., 2016), as a guiding principle to continue with interviews. I then named each theme and identified what each theme captured.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the validity or accuracy of the collected data (Amankwaa, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Research is credible when proper procedures and documentation are followed. In order to ensure the credibility of data, I followed a written protocol and kept detailed notes of each step of my research process. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they wanted to participate in the transcript review to check for accuracy. I used member-checking via transcript review to confirm that I captured the data accurately and the findings correctly reflect the participants' views.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results of one research are appliable to other studies (Amankwaa, 2016). My research focused on COs working in correctional centers in Alaska, and the transferability of this study's results may be impacted by the geographic limitations of the study. To address transferability, I used purposive sampling and followed a written interview protocol (Appendix B). I attempted to create a thick description and account of each participant's perceptions, recollections, and experiences to provide sufficient detail in describing the case being explored. The information from the interviews was detailed, and it is believed to be authentic since most of the participants did not glamorize their work in the department. I am not working in the

Department of Corrections; the participants were not my coworkers, I had no prior connection to them, and all volunteered to participate in the project.

Reliability

Reliability is the consistency in the data collection process (Bengtsson, 2016). Research is reliable or dependable when the proper and consistent procedures, as well as documentation, are followed across all aspects of the study. In order to ensure reliability, I adhered to the same procedures for each participant and interview. I documented my notes, as well used member-checking via transcript review. I also conducted one follow-up interview to ensure that the themes that I identified were consistent. Finally, I ensured data saturation by interviewing participants until the research question had been answered and no new themes emerged.

Confirmability

In research, confirmability refers to the accuracy of the collected data and others' capacity to collaborate and confirm the results (Amankwaa, 2016). To ensure confirmability, I maintained continuous documentation of my efforts to check and recheck the data collection process. I also kept a research journal to keep my thoughts separate from those of the participants and kept detailed notes to capture any personal views or biases during the interviews. I also ensured that the conclusions for my study were based on the information collected during the interviews. Having limited experience with the phenomenon being research and no connection to the department of corrections, I was able to interpret the data provided by participants without any undue influence.

Results

Themes

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore how COs perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. This study was guided by one research question: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers? The themes related to stress that were identified following the coding process included: personal characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, and relationships with the administration. While the purpose of the research was to explore how COs manage stress, the topic of stress itself was not noted to be a theme. Coping with stress, however, was noted to be important and is included in this chapter. When analyzing for coping strategies COs use when dealing with stress, two themes were revealed: coping with stress at work and coping with stress outside of the institution. The following table shows a breakdown of the themes and sub-themes.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Personal characteristics	Following rules and procedures Treatment of inmates
Interpersonal dynamics	Working with female COs Personality disposition Working as a team
Relationship with administration	Unheard complaints Expectations Lack of communication
Coping with stress	Effects of stress Coping with stress outside of work

Personal Characteristics

This theme was identified as contributing to interpersonal conflict. Additional subthemes that emerged were following rules and procedures and the treatment of prisoners.

Following Rules and Procedures. Another point of conflict among COs was around rules and regulations. Interview participants divided COs into two groups: rule followers and rule benders. Participants noted that a set of rules and regulations exist. P5 said, "There's a lot more rules for correctional officers." Some COs are strict in following the set rules. P9 stated, "I followed policies and procedures as best I could if I made a mistake, I let somebody know, I let my boss know about it. And we worked it out." While others tended to bend them, P1 said, "Words are nice, and we have regulations for that. Are they really truly enforced? Sometimes not." This inconsistency created a place of conflict. P6 noted that "if the inmates aren't stressed, the staff aren't stressed." The same participant indicated that one way to accomplish that was to "give them a little extra, you know, give them an extra pair of freaking socks if they want three pairs of socks. Give them three pairs of socks, you know, and work with them instead of working against them" (P6). P2 discussed bending the rules but not enough to get written up:

> The rules say he should get two pencils. And we said, no, he can get one pencil, and if he [inmate] breaks it, we'll give him another one - type of thing, nothing. We could get fired or written over, written up over.

COs noted that using discretion while may be in conflict with the rules, it a resource when managing inmates. However, other COs had names for those that were not

following rules and were more inclined to use their discretion more frequently to do things the inmates asked for. P5 indicated,

> We would call it, you know, inmate lover type thing… so they, they give him everything you know that even stuff they're not stuff to escape with but you know, just more stuff than they should be getting entitled to get.

Also, according to P5, some COs "expected officers to follow the rules." P5 continued, stating that they were,

> Not afraid to stand up to the administration or to the inmates, to make them follow the rules. And then that means that I had to confront a fellow officer because their bad behavior because they were doing something inappropriate. I was not shy about stepping up and saying something.

P2 noted that some COs "They see you doing one thing that's not straight by the book. And first thing they do is turn you in". P9 discussed working with a difficult coworker he referred to as a "problem child" and described the coworker as

> Stubborn, [he] didn't follow the rules, did whatever he wanted to do, didn't participate as he should… And they're the ones that don't last very long. Because they're stubborn, and they're dumb. I mean, they just they won't do it. Like, no matter how long you how hard you hammer the policy and procedures into them. They just won't follow through.

P10 described two instances of going against the institutional procedure. Once when he discovered a tattoo gun and instead of searching every cell to find

out the needle for it, he asked that it be turned in, telling inmates that if it gets turned in, no one will get written up

> Was it against policy? Absolutely. I should have written up contraband report and everything invested incident report. But for one, I usually found that needle, you know, it was on my desk. And my biggest thing is I don't want to get stuck with it, nor don't want one of my other officers gets you on the spread disease. So even though it was against policy and procedure, what I did, I think there was a greater cause of good to be had.

P10 also discussed instances when inmates were depleting prison inventory by having more socks and other items than needed. One CO searched the cells and returned with two garbage bags of times.

> And I, on the other hand, went to what you call a heavy yield, the one that's kind of charging the mod and say, Listen, I don't want to, and I know you guys don't want me to go through each cell, and pluck out all this extra, any state extra stuff. Here some bags; I'm gonna leave via the next time the bell rings; I need something, you know, four bags by the door of all state property. You know, and they respected me for doing that. And I got more out of it than what the other guy did.

P10 also noted that some of his coworkers "thought it was cool, some that were assholes, they didn't like it." Being able to use discretion and implementing informal rules is noted by COs as a behavioral management tool. However, discretionary decision-

making is also viewed as conflicting with the rules and regulations of the facility and can negatively impact the relationship between COs.

Treatment of Inmates. Treatment of inmates and fairness was under the subtheme that was identified. Some participants self-identified as treating inmates and others fairly. P10 stated, “If you love what you do, it’s not going to be bad. Always treat people fairly”. “I treated everybody was as fairly as I could. And they appreciated it”. P7 said he was known among inmates as being fair. He discussed an instance when another CO asked an inmate about who are the COs that are fair, “The inmate came right back with [participant 7]. He treats everybody fairly. He doesn’t hold a grudge. He doesn’t treat anybody bad”. P4 described her style of work, “I’m very when it comes to it, firm, fair and consistent.” COs who noted they treated inmates fairly reported having more positive experiences with inmates and considered interactions with inmates as less stressful.

However, there are also COs who were noted to be more aggressive and administering punishment on their own. P7 said, “There are a number of COs at all levels that thinks that it’s their job to punish the convicts. No, it’s just our job to babysit them. The punishment is living in that hotel”. P9 noted that violence towards inmates was not uncommon, “He got fired twice, using excessive force on a prisoner. And then when he got he got his job back, and he went did the same thing to the same prisoner. So they fired him for real”. Yet another participant, P3, talked about his own history of violence towards inmates,

> And I was a real asshole. I mean, until I realized that the inmates are not the enemy. It was just a job. I was a jerk. You know, Mr. Macho Man… I used to choke the shit out of people just to give it a pass out, and we drag them off to a cell… I'm real thankful that there was no recording cameras. Because I think most of us back in the day would ended up in jail.

P5 noted that, before he started a job at a new prison as a transfer, he received a call from the superintendent before he event showed up for his first shift

> He [the superintendent] heard that I was an aggressive correctional officer that I was, you know, a bad correctional officer. And I'm not… There's correctional officers that are just they're collecting a paycheck and other correctional officers that really tried to push it, making the inmates follow the rules.

The overall consensus, however, was that COs attempt to be fair. P3 said, "I caught myself treating sex offenders differently than others. And it just wasn't fair". COs also view inmates as wanting to be treated fairly. P10 described how he believed inmates want to be treated,

> They [inmates] just want to be treated fairly; they don't want to be picked on or, you know, looked upon below; they want to be treated like a human being…. And just be fair, that's, that's probably the biggest thing.

Similarly, P7 described his attempts at being fair, "I tried seriously, honestly, to treat every inmate as I'd want to be treated if I was living there." COs who noted that they treated inmates respectfully and fairly also reported a more positive work environment.

Interpersonal Dynamics

This theme was included subthemes: working with female staff, personality disposition, and working as a team. While none of the interview questions specifically asked anything related to gender, 10 out of the 12 participants discussed the conflict with female staff, including issues with female coworkers and supervisors.

Working With Female COs. When it comes to gender, female COs are perceived as "naturally smarter …their relationship and interpersonal communication level they have higher skills …. they have better speech" (P1). P7 noted that Female COs tend to be better at moving prisoners, and "they make anywhere they wanted to… female officers generally do a lot better getting inmates to go places". P3 noted that his female coworker "was great" because

> She could talk to an inmate to do anything she wanted them to do. I mean, if they're screaming and banging on the drunk tank door, she had a way; she could just go in. Yeah, hold his top him down. And we're where we would probably have gone in and just tied him up like a pretzel and left him lying there naked. You know, she could do she did much better than we did.

P1 noted that after he reported his female coworker not doing enough walk-throughs, she complained about him, and "she was able to get me in trouble faster." P2 noted that he did not have problems with female staff; he went on to describe instances where female staff were "were the bitchiest". P3 recounted a false accusation of sexual harassment and a hostile work environment suit by a female coworker who filed the suit after she retired. The lawsuit was subsequently dismissed. P2 noted that after an instance

of misconduct, a female Sargent was written up, “but they’ve never fired her because she has white she’s female for one, and she has some Native Alaskan blood in her.” P6 described an instance where a female CO was arrested after a dope grow operation was discovered in her house, and

> There was no consequences for that I know of… [Superintendent] kept it really, really quiet, that he didn’t want anybody to know because he was going to push it under the rug and make sure she kept her job. And he did.

P4 described a disagreement with a female coworker after she was told she could take leave. The coworker did not change her vacation time as she said she would, and soon after, the incident was promoted.

> She’s now my staff sergeant. Yeah. So now I’m in a position of, I now work for this person that I no longer really respect. Because I, I mean, I understand that her family was coming up, but she is very committed to me.

P12 discussed issues with a female coworker over treatment of a prisoner in an incident where staff followed the instructions of the female staff, who was an assistant superintendent, against the advice of the male shift supervisor. A CO ended up being hurt in the incident.

> And I let her know, like, I was angry and said, I told you, so. So with this disagreement between how to handle unruly inmates and because she was the supervisor, she trumped my way of doing things. Our working relationship just became worse till I retired. We stayed professional but didn’t get along very

> well… She was on a path of being the superintendent. And that was one of the deciding factors of retiring because I didn't want to work for her.
>
> P6 described a difference between male and female supervisors
>
> I got switched back and forth from a man supervisor to a woman supervisor. And they were completely different. The man was very much this is what we're gonna do. This is how we're going to do it. We're gonna take care of it, and we're gonna all treat each other fairly. And the woman was like, well, you know, he can't say that to a woman. That's against the rules. And if a woman said something means to me, she would be like, well, you just need to get tougher skin… And I'm like, well, you said, last week, you said, a man can't say that to her. But this week, you're telling me to get tougher skin.

While interview questions did not ask gender-specific questions, the majority of participants discussed having conflicts with female coworkers or female supervisors. Some participants noted being aware of instances of sexual harassment female COs suffered at the hands of their male coworkers, while others discussed being the subject or being aware of false allegations of sexual harassment. The only female participant did not discuss being aware of or experiencing sexual harassment. Female COs were employed only in women's prisons until the 1970s and currently represent 30% of the correctional workforce (Chandler, 2018). As more females join and rise in the ranks in correctional institutions, future research should focus on interactions and conflicts between male and female COs.

Personality Disposition. Personality dispositions and fit to be a CO were noted to be a source of interpersonal stress. P3 stated alluded to a culture change in the department when it comes to COs

> It's a different type of CO now, too I think … you know, back then we were just knuckle draggers, you know, with big turn keys. Now we got guys that, you know, have this very militaristic view, short haircuts, and big beefy muscles. I mean, it's different. They're not knuckle draggers, like we were.

P4 noted that many of the new COs are young and not qualified for the job.

> COs who get hired on are not qualified because the minimum qualifications to be a CO are that you're 21 and have a high school graduation diploma. That's it …. I have a lot of really young officers. And so while they may have a couple years seniority over me, I'm old enough to be their mom.

P5 stated, "So when they hire these 20-year-olds at [Facility name] they just can't keep up, you know, they can't catch up in time to be able to deal with the physical requirements and the mental requirements". P12 noted that "Correctional officers are Type A personalities. So, you know everyone wants to be the boss. They all want to tell you how to do things and how they are right". P10 noted that ego is related to succeeding or failing as a CO, "Because the ego is what will kill you in this job. If you have too much or too little ego, you won't be able to cope". When asked what some traits of a good CO are, P1 noted, "They should be whoever is hired should be mature enough. Not to be childish and to be responsive, responsible". The participants noted an association between age and the perception that younger COs are less hard-working and not as

capable of doing the job as more seasoned and older COs. COs also noted that despite staffing shortages, only qualified candidates should be hired.

Working as a Team. Teamwork was noted to be a place of conflict as well. Research supports that work-related conflict is especially impactful in professions or situations where the success of the organization is dependent on the cohesiveness of the team (De Jong et al., 2016; Rezvani et al., 2019; Rezvani & Khosravi, 2018). Discord among COs becomes evident when they are not working together. P7 recalled a coworker who "spent his time trying to catch staff doing things they weren't supposed to do. It just made no sense. Wait a minute, hey, we're the good guys, we are on the same team". P8 noted that working with not cooperative coworkers is a source of stress, "you want to analyze why your coworker is not cooperating not being a team player. So it's just kind of like, you know, It gives you a little stressed of wonder who you're working with". P9 indicated that teamwork is imperative for a well-functioning institution, "it has to be a total team effort. Everybody has a certain little part to do. And it has to be done together. That's how that's how it works…that was our strength". The same participant referred to COs who do not want to work with others as "lone wolves."

> That was a thing, a team; it won't let you get the guys that are there that are trying to be a single, lone wolf out there. They don't last long. They don't work well. And because the other officers that are part of the team and working with the team, you know, I mean, they'll shun these guys. And but yeah, but no, it's, you know, I never really had a bad problem with a whole lot of stressful. I mean, instantaneous stress. (P9)

While only one participant discussed “lone wolves,” P11 referred to himself as a “Fenrir The Wolf,” a mythological Norse creature who “comes out and play” when upset by others. “The wolf is whichever one you feed. Well, as I’ve got the friendly, happy puppy dog, I’ve also got Fenrir, and when that one comes out and play, people disappear”. This participant also noted to spent most of his shift working independently and does not have constant interactions with other COs.

Relationship With Administration

Few participants spoke positively about supervisors and management. P7 noted, “I had a bunch of very good supervisors that did not cause me stress.” Another participant noted that being there for his staff, talking to them, helping with any problems made a good supervisor. Yet P12 noted that good “supervisors would recognize stressful times and cut us some slack you know, basically gave us an easier schedule. If they noticed they needed a break”. Overwhelmingly, however, participants noted negative experiences with supervisors and administration.

Unheard Complaints. Participants noted that their voices and complaints go on unheard by the administration. P4 noted, “we feel unheard. And we feel ignored and neglected”. Those who expressed concern or brought issues up to the administration noted that their concerns were not addressed. P1 discussed an instance where he went to administration about other COs not doing the required amount of walk-throughs daily. “I went into a brick wall with my bosses” (P1). P3 recounted an instance of a CO being bullied by coworkers because he was gay, but “the administration didn’t do anything. I went to administration about it. And they didn’t do anything about it”. P6 noted that

when he reported drugs being brought into the institution, “the administration went round and around about it, and they weren’t worried about getting it to stop. They were worried about shutting me up”. P7 stated that when staff would bring issues to the administration, “the administration didn’t do anything about it. We’d complain”, including instances of a non-custodial staff person harassing inmates. Participants who indicated to have supporting supervisors were noted to have fewer negative connotations towards their job, while COs who discussed negative interactions with administrations were found to believe they were less supported and had more negative feelings towards their job.

Expectations. P11 recalled having a conflict with a supervisor regarding a procedure: ‘He [Supervisor] believed I was not doing my job correctly. I believe I was doing it correctly. And, of course, by the book. Turned out I was right”. P5 noted instances of conflicting messages coming from the administration,

> They [administration] want you to not follow the rules to make things run smoothly. And then when things go bad, they throw you under the bus for not following those same rules that they’re basically forcing you not to fall because there’s not enough [staff].

Participants indicated frequent contradictory messages from administration and suffering consequences of not following the inconsistent rules and expectations set by them.

The administration also expects COs to “make the inmates happy and follow the rules” (P5). Participants also noted a struggle between “the practicality of what we

actually are doing and facility and what the administration wants us to do" (P4). P7 discussed the frequent changes in procedure

> And we were all dealing with the administration and say, well, we're doing it this way this year. And we're doing it that way next year. And, you know, and so much of the administrative part of corrections never stepped into the real side of working corrections.

COs noted a dissonance between goals of the institution, expectations from administration, role expectations, and personal views when receiving conflicting directions from the administration. When faced with role ambiguity and lack of clear role expectations, COs noted being unable to meet the organizational goals and were more likely to report being dissatisfied by their workplace and identify that conflict as a source of work-related stress.

Participants also noted that the administration is not concerned about their safety. A participant noted that the administration is more concerned about money and administration "will cut safety and security … we get it we know what the problems lie but don't bullshit us" (P10). P5 noted, "They [administration] don't want when these assaults happen; they want you to call the police and have them arrest prisoner because then they can't control their institution." A poignant remark was made by P7, who stated, "but as far as staff, pray for some intelligence and competence in the administration." While COs are expected to maintain the safety and security of other staff and inmates, they do not feel that the administration is focused on their safety. COs are in a state of vigilance, aware of potential harm or manipulation coming from inmates, so much so that

they become hostile towards the inmates. They also feel that the administration is being deceitful, which also causes them to be unreceptive and distrustful of management.

According to most participants, the administration is more of an issue than inmates. P5 talked about the relationship between COs and the administration

> There's actually more stress between the administration and COs than there is the inmates and COs, the administration, you know, you're you go into the job knowing that there's going to be stress and conflict with the inmates, and you don't expect the administration to treat you like you're the bad guy.

Another one stated, "You know, I never had much of a problem with the inmates. I had problems with the administration" (P6), and yet another one, "Most of the stress was not the inmates, but the administration and the supervisors. My stress was from the administration. I don't ever remember any stress from inmates" (P7). Participants attributed the lack of concern and responsiveness to administration not having the experience of being a CO. "Administration have not been correctional officers themselves. So they don't actually have the experience of implementing what we're being told to do or what they're coming up with" (P4). The administration is thought of as "bosses," "because bosses can out hands in the pockets of the walk like a restaurant from place to place" (P1), "dictators," "the boss will tell you what to do" (P7), "political hacks" (P7) and "same idiot people … in charge" (P9). Participants noted resentment when those without CO experience were promoted to higher positions. They also reported promotions based on nepotism rather than merit and skill. COs reported that

those in higher positions have more organizational authority and use that power to undermine the limited authority COs have over inmates.

Lack of Communication. Participants also noted the lack of communication from the administration. P4 noted that "communication is huge" but added that the administration would implement changes without letting COs know. Another participant, P12, noted that the administration "could have communicated more." Another one noted that in booking, officers get upwards of 400 emails a day. Yet another stated that he was never issued a state email, and it was not noted until he was close to his retirement. He retired in 2016.

Coping With Stress

According to TTSC, stress is a product of the relationship between a person and their surroundings. Stress is a constant process of appraisal of the perceived stress and evaluating available coping strategies to mitigate and manage it (Folkman et al., 1986). When discussing stress, two themes were noted, effects of stress, which included physical and psychological issues, and methods of coping with stress at and outside of work.

Effects of Stress. Participants in the study recounted various effects of stress, including physical and psychological ailments, with one participant noting that in his last 4 years prior to retirement, he would call out at least once a week.

Weight gain and sleep issues were noted amount many participants. Issues of weight gain were noted by the participants who stated that they did either not have time to eat during shifts, forgot to eat when they got home, or would "eat to make up for the

lost sleep" (P7). P6 noted that when he was hired, he weighed 195lbs, and upon retirement, his weight was 270lbs. Another participant discussed food habits and noted

> We would sit around and talk, and that is one way that we really deal with stress, coffee breaks, and eating. We would eat so I think the last four years I was there I gained 25 pounds. So yeah, I gained 25 pounds the first 16 years I was there. And then the last four years I gained 25 pounds. So again, 50 pounds and 20 years.

Weight gain was noted despite the extreme physical nature of the job. Participants noted walking 5, 10, and even 14 miles a day as a part of their routine and not having time to eat or take a break. P5 described his day workday in the following way

> You have to walk the whole institution every half hour on a 12 hour shift. That staff member walks 14 miles. So, it's extremely physical. And not just physical, but your feet are dead. You haven't eaten because there's no time to have a break. Usually, around 10 o'clock in the morning, things pick up and stuff. So, you've got time to eat between six in the morning and 10 o'clock in the morning. And then things get so busy that you can grab a bite here and there as you're on the run.

Researchers have linked stress levels to poor diet and lack of exercise in COs and other law enforcement professions (Buden et al., 2017; Faghri et al., 2015; Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Useche et al., 2019). Participants attributed shiftwork, excessive overtime, and rotating shifts as the main reasons for weight gain. Understanding the relationship between work environment and individual behavior can be instrumental in developing

appropriate interventions aimed at improving health and decreasing the prevalence of chronic diseases, including obesity in COs.

Sleep issues were also commonly mentioned. P1 noted,

> My sleep is not normalized. And five years into this position of days only, and I cannot sleep. I wake up and so not once, two times, but let's say, five, six times before three o'clock, probably I'm regularly waking up. And then, from three to five, I sleep well.

P4 stated, "I just want to come home, and I usually fall asleep on the couch within an hour of coming home." While P5 stated he "tried to get a full night's sleep every day" in preparation for work the next day. P11 attributed his sleep apnea to the rotating schedule, and another one noted that often after working overtime, "most stressful is not falling asleep. After staying awake for 20 something hours". Participants indicated overtime and rotating schedules as some of the causes of fatigue and sleep issues. Sleep disturbances and obesity are connected; COs reported not getting enough sleep and being tired. Increased overtime and reduced sleep, as reported by participants, leads to a reduction in physical activity, and COs reported being too tired to want to be active.

Participants also talked about the effects of being tired. P8 noted, "when a person is tired, their judgment sometimes just like driving down the highway. You know, if you're tired, you might veer off one way or another". He recalled an incident that on at least one occasion, his coworker, who was following him when driving home, noted that the participant was weaving on the road after getting off his shift

> He's followed me, and he looked ahead, and he said what the hell there goes a drunk driver. Man, this guy's waving. He pulled up, he's gonna get the license plate and turn it in. So when he got close to the vehicle, and he recognized who it was. And you know, we just left the jail 30 minutes ago.

Rosenberg (2019) found that sleep is noted to be essential to processing information, learning, and memory, and sleep deprivation affect motor and cognitive functioning resulting in performance levels that are comparable to those induced by alcohol.

Researchers have found that prolonged exposure to stress among COs has been linked to their inability to carry out their duties. P1 noted that" people who are under stress, they can underperform" and noted that he saw "stress influencing other coworkers to the point they cannot count their floor right." Booking was noted to be a "very stressful spot" (P2), especially when it was busy and it was not uncommon for "counts not matching or clearing" (P2). COs need to be able to think clearly, judge situations appropriately, and react accordingly; overreacting or underreacting impacts not only them but those around them and the overall safety of the institution.

Coping With Stress Outside of Work. A part of stress is also using coping strategies to manage it. The participants were consistent in saying they have no ways to deal with difficult coworkers while on shift, aside from avoiding them, even though they work "elbow the elbow next to them all day long" (P10). P12 noted that "people would bounce around between shifts because they just switched schedules and worked with other people," while others would avoid the person they disliked or have had a conflict

with. Only one CO noted that he sought therapy and medication for his depression which he attributes to work-related stress.

When asked about coping with stress outside of work, participants noted that the best way of coping with stress outside of work was not taking it home. P2 stated, "You just can't take it home with you. Yeah, I would just bring it home, some people would call it, the stupid crap… I call it funny crap, but not the stress with officers or sergeants". P9 noted, "When I walked out the door. It's like you got to switch. When I walk out the door going out to my car, I'm starting to wind down I've started to turn that off". Another participant noted that taking stress home has negative consequences, "Some people, unfortunately, do take it home with them. You see people get divorced. You know, you've seen those people turn into complete assholes over time" (P10).

One way of decompressing prior to going home was going out for breakfast or dinner at the end of their week's shift in order to "tone down" (P7). Four participants noted that their crews would go out to eat together before going home. P4 noted that her drive home is her time to unwind, "The nice thing about having a half-hour drive home is that I have that half hour to kind of decompress." P2 mentioned that his coworker would "would show up to work early and sit in the parking lot. So he could … decompress. So he can decompress before he goes into work". P3 noted that he needed time to unwind and that his wife "would leave me alone for a good day or two. I would just I was just shut down". P8 described his and his wife's behavior when he came home

> And she [wife] watched me, she said, 'You know, it takes you about an hour or so to unwind' … at home, it's just one of those things where you had to, I would

> have to watch what I'm saying or thinking for that first hour or so till I open the mail because the wife is, she's sitting on pins and needles, so to speak. And it's just kind of like it's, it's not good for a family.

Participants noted engaging in a variety of physical activities outside of work to decompress; chopping wood, gardening, dog walking, riding motorcycles and snow machines, recreational shooting, going to the gym, working on art projects were commonly mentioned. One participant noted that he was involved in Boy Scouts and his church; another one was mushing dogs with his daughter.

Participants also noted that being able to take breaks and physically leave the facility was helpful. P6 discussed the need for breaks,

> One of the most things important things in working in a prison is to take your breaks and take your lunch break and get away. If you can, go hide in the closet, go walk the yard, go walk outside, go sit in your car. Take all of your breaks because that's one of the most important things to deal with stress at work is to get away with it get away from it for a few minutes.

P2 noted that changing his job responsibilities and working Monday–Friday helped because he was able to leave the facility for lunch, "that was huge. Yeah, you know, I can go and go across the street to the mall and walk around for an hour do whatever, you know, run errands". Yet another participant, P6, stated that he would "would walk the halls several times extra, just so I could breathe, and I would go out into the yard and walk the yard extra couple times, just to deal with the stress." COs noted the need for regular breaks and indicated that taking breaks outside of the facility was the

best way to decompress; however, they also noted that they often they are not able to have even a short break. There are explicit rules for truck drivers about the maximum hours of work allowed before mandatory time off because driving for too long can lead to accidents (Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, 2020). COs work hours are not regulated as closely. Working long hours and rotating shifts on little sleep without regularly scheduled breaks puts officers, their coworkers, and the facility's functioning at risk.

Summary

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore and understand the experiences of stress in COs. This chapter detailed the process of participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis process. The findings of this study supported existing research, which notes that COs and not inmates cause the majority of stress to other COs. While inmates do present a source of stress, they were not the focal point of conversations around the causes of stress to COs. Personal characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, and relationships with the administration were noted to be the cause of stress.

Chapter 5 will provide a detailed discussion of the findings and present recommendations for future research studies. The chapter begins with a summary of the findings. The next chapter will also include a discussion on recommendations and limitations of the current study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to investigate and explore the work experiences of COs in rural correctional facilities in Alaska and to learn how correctional staff members perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. The following research question guided this research: How do COs working in rural and frontier prisons perceive and manage stress stemming from the interpersonal conflict between officers? I collected data via semistructured interviews until I reached data saturation. Once all interviews were transcribed, they were coded and analyzed. The analysis revealed three main themes: (a) personal characteristics, (b) interpersonal dynamics, and (c) relationship with the administration. In this chapter, I discuss the findings revealed by the themes that emerged from the interview data.

Interpretation of the Findings

I relied on the TTSC to examine COs' perceptions of interpersonal conflict and work-related stress. TTSC establishes that stress results from an individual's appraisal (or understanding) of the environmental stressors (or demands; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). COs continuously engage in an appraisal process and assess the intensity of each demand. COs also evaluate how to handle each stressful situation while at work. How COs experience environmental stressors depends on each individual's perception and coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When faced with a potentially stressful situation, an individual first engages in a primary appraisal to determine if the event is a threat and, during a secondary appraisal, evaluates for coping mechanisms to mitigate it (Baqutayan, 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The cognitive process of appraisal is based on the

individual's experiences and perceptions of a stressful event. Even individuals facing identical situations can view and experience stress differently (Samios & Baran, 2017; Wethington et al., 2015). This supports the notion that different events result in different symptoms and that every CO has a different response to a situation.

TTSC is well suited to examine stress in COs and was used to explore the experience of interpersonal conflict, which differs depending on the individual's perception. The premise of TTSC's is that it is transactional, dynamic, and involves an individualized, situation-specific process of experiencing stress, and accounts for the relationship an individual has with their surroundings (Folkman et al., 1986). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987), an individual selects either a problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategy, depending on the stressor. Problem-focused coping strategies are aimed directly at changing the stressor; for example, COs call out or ask to change shifts when faced with having the same shifts as someone with whom they do not get along. Problem-focused coping, however, is likely to be less effective in a correctional facility due to the rigidity of a correctional environment (Bisri et al., 2021). Emotion-focused coping strategies are directed at changing the emotional responses and reducing negative feelings that result from a stressor without changing the source of the stress. COs in this research did not discuss the emotion-coping strategies that they used. This can be explained by Sorensen and Johnsen (2021), who describe engaging in coping strategies as 'not in my head' and 'out of my head.' 'Not in my head' is comparable to emotional distancing and refers to avoiding instances that can cause unwanted emotions (Kemper, 1984). 'Out of my head', is much like 'hiding feelings' (Mann, 1998) or

maintaining neutrality (Kemper, 1984) and involves repressing emotions. COs in this study discussed hiding their emotions, with P9 referring to the process of switching on and off when leaving work or when returning back on duty. Other COs indicated that they would leave work stress at work and avoiding work stress spilling over to their personal life.

Within the context of this theory, the findings of this study confirm that COs experience high levels of work-related stress due to conflict with other COs as well as the administration. All participants noted that the job of a CO is stressful. This is consistent with previous research by Jaegers et al. (2020), Lambert et al. (2016), and Ritzman (2019). Three major themes developed: (a) personal characteristics with subthemes of rules and procedures and the treatment of prisoners; (b) interpersonal dynamics with subthemes working with female staff, personality disposition, and working as a team; and (c) relationship with the administration. Based on data gathered, COs attempt to be fair in their treatment of prisoners but are restricted by rules and regulations they believe are not practical. Conflict with female COs was attributed to various incidents that resulted in the perception that female COs do not get in trouble easily and are promoted despite being involved in disciplinary events. In regards to working as a team, some COs who noted fewer instances of conflict with other COs attributed it to working in a position with limited interactions with other COs. Others noted that teamwork is necessary to be effective and safe in a correctional setting. When discussing their individual experiences of stress stemming from interpersonal conflict with coworkers, research participants discussed examples of issues with other COs, supervisors, and administration; some

stated that their perception of the participating coworker or supervisor irrevocably changed. The participants also expressed a less than favorable view of the administration, referring to disappointment with lack of follow up on reports of illegal or unsafe behavior by fellow COs.

The findings of this study also confirm that work-related stress results in physical and psychological ailments. Relevant literature has suggested that COs suffer PTSD and hypervigilance and live in a constant state of paranoia, which leads to increased substance abuse, depression, high rates of injury and illness, increased health risks, family problems, and risk of suicide (Bezerra et al., 2016; Lambert, Worley, et al., 2017; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b; Viotti, 2016). When discussing their individual experiences of work-related stress, participants noted issues with sleep (sleeping too much or not enough); concentration; back, shoulder, and neck tension pain; gastric issues; diabetes; weight gain; heart problems; and alcohol and drug use. Gutshall et al. (2017) noted that COs working under extreme stress levels are more likely not to manage job responsibilities, including not functioning in a cognitive capacity. Participants in this study noted that when stressed out, COs tend to underperform, are not willing to take on additional responsibilities, and call out sick more.

The results of this study emphasize the need for COs to have support in the immediate work environment, especially from their supervisors and the administration. Steiner and Wooldredge (2015) found that COs who receive more support and have more

contact with their coworkers experience lower stress levels. Similarly, Mao et al. (2019) found that workplace support reduces negative staff behaviors.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations in qualitative research are potential weaknesses and shortcomings of the study that are out of the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One limitation of this study lies in the data collection method and reliance on interviews and participants' perceptions. While the interviews were in-depth, it is possible that participants did not fully articulate their experiences and additional information exists that could be added if participants were asked the same questions a second time. All participants did receive a copy of the transcribed interview with the questions noted on the transcription, and two provided additional feedback, although it was not substantial to change the overall collected data.

The three current COs who participated in the study may not have answered questions truthfully due to fear of retaliation, even though the informed consent form and follow-up conversations emphasized the confidentiality of their personal information. Participants who were retired and separated COs noted that they were free to discuss any issues and instances because the department would no longer be able to retaliate against them; they noted that their names could be shared in the study.

Another limitation lies in the sampling method. I used purposeful and snowball sampling to identify potential study participants. These sampling methods may limit the participants' variability and may affect the generalizability of the study. However, the intentional selection of study participants was needed. Johnson et al. (2019) and Palinkas

et al. (2015) noted that purposeful and snowball sampling is appropriate when research questions can be answered by a particular experience. The purpose of my research was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. These experiences are specific only to COs working in rural areas in Alaska; therefore, only COs currently working or who previously worked in Alaska were selected to participate.

This study had a sample size of 12 participants. This is a potential limitation in terms of transferability. Researchers recommend a sample of six to 12 for interview-based qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2006). Other researchers have suggested a sample size between three and 16 participants (Malterud et al., 2016; Sykes et al., 2018). I implemented data saturation as a guiding principle in my research. Data saturation occurs when no new themes are revealed, and no additional interviews or sampling are needed (Bellamy et al., 2016). I continued sampling until saturation was reached, which was accomplished with 12 interviews. The 12 participants worked across different facilities in Alaska, some having worked in more than one place during their career, and collectively 10 out of 12 facilities in Alaska had COs represented in the study.

The final potential limitation existing in every research is bias. To address any potential research bias, I took detailed field notes. Doing so has been found to be effective in minimizing research bias and increasing the transparency of the research process (Carcary, 2009; Johnson et al., 2019). I also kept detailed notes and a journal of my opinions and thoughts during my research process.

Recommendations

Results of this research yielded a number of recommendations. Due to the reluctance of current COs to participate, future studies should focus on retired COs as target participants. This may help minimize the reluctance of staff to participate and is likely to yield richer results. Expanding the scope of this study to include other states would improve generalizability and increase the range of data. This will help determine if interpersonal conflict among COs is present in other correctional settings or if it is specific to Alaska.

All participants noted a level of frustration, distrust, and dislike towards the administration. Interviewing the administration would be beneficial. This would lead to gaining the administrations' perspectives on the perceptions of conflict and stress and compare these perceptions to those of COs perceptions. This comparison could benefit the administration and COs, as they would better understand the stressors faced by COs and the department at large.

Their level of education was mentioned by several participants. One participant noted that having a higher level of education is not common among COs. "I've got quite a bit of education behind me. That's not going to be normal for the average CO" (P1). Another participant, P9, stated that COs are thought to have low education

> And we hear comments… snide comments like a bunch of knuckle-dragging high school diploma, corrections officers… amongst those, those knuckle-dragging, high school diploma COs were people who had master's degree in all kinds of things.

Exploring the level of education as a predictor of job satisfaction and job stress in COs could lead to changes in the hiring and duty assignment process.

While my research did not focus on religion to cope with stress, one COs noted that he relies on his faith to reduce stress. Future research could explore how religion assists in stress reduction in COs. This research would be relevant in rural and urban correctional centers. Finally, including observation of interaction between COs and COs and supervisors and administration could also be beneficial to further explore stress stemming from interpersonal conflict.

Implications for Social Change

COs face numerous stressors daily. They are forced to work a rotating shift schedule (Ritzman, 2019). They face issues with leadership and administration (Dollard & Winefield, 1998; Lambert et al., 2016). They also deal with conflict with other COs, an issue that has not been a significant focus of research. Most work environments are social in nature and require multiple if not constant interactions between staff. That coupled with a high-stress environment leads to increased opportunities for interpersonal conflict (Jex, 1998; Van Thanh, 2016; Waters, 1999). Work-related conflict is especially impactful in professions where the success of the organization is dependent on the cohesiveness of the team (De Jong et al., 2016; Rezvani et al., 2019; Rezvani & Khosravi, 2018). This study demonstrated that COs seek cohesion on their crew and want to get support from each other and from their supervisors and administration.

Prolonged exposure to stress among COs has detrimental effects. COs are plagued with cardiovascular disease, increased consumption of alcohol, depression, high rates of

injury and illness, burnout, family problems, inability to carry out their duties, and risk of suicide higher than that of the rest of the general working population (Bezerra et al., 2016; Jaegers et al., 2020; Lambert, Worley, et al., 2017; Martinez-Corts et al., 2015; Viotti, 2016). Adverse effects of stress affect not just staff but the overall functioning of correctional institutions (Armstrong et al., 2015). For example, COs who cannot manage stress may call out, creating staffing shortages and hindering the effective functioning of an institution.

This study addresses the gap in the literature by examining how COs mitigate work-related stress. To address this gap, I focused on correctional staff who experienced stress due to conflict with coworkers. The data gathered in this study yielded information regarding the work experiences of COs and factors that lead to a hostile work environment in rural correctional facilities. The results of this and other studies provide insight into stressors faced by COs and can offer information on areas that need change, including a revision in policies, facilitating a work environment free of interpersonal conflict, and reducing the levels of stress experienced by staff. The results of this study can lead to improvements the administration can make to increase job satisfaction and retention rates of COs and increase the availability of services to correctional staff.

One of the ways to make improvements is to increase communication between COs and the administration. Participants in the study noted limited communication from the administration about the reason for changes but rather frequently were told to adapt to new procedures without any explanation. One participant stated, “They [the administration] don’t ever come and talk to us about any other changes. So that’s another

stressor" (P4). The participant further indicated that her facility was told to change the procedure for 10-days, "it was a 10-day agreement. That was over a year ago". COs expressed their frustration with lack of communication and feeling of distrust which often leads to disengagement from the job.

Another needed improvement is the schedules. Participants noted issues with rotating schedules being difficult. "That flipping back and forth from night to day schedule is just horrendous on the body" (P5). Another participant noted that he would have preferred one shift,

> One of the biggest stressors on everybody working rotation corrections is that you work the week, days, a week off week, a nice week off. I mean, the older your body, the harder it is for you to do the flip flop, right? When I was working rotation, if I could work straight nights, I would have jumped at it. (P7).

One participant suggested extended periods of time, suggesting "six months, something more lengthy than just week on week" (P9), adding that other institutions outside of Alaska are able to accommodate different schedules. P3 indicated

> [Better schedules] benefited those institutions. You'd have people that weren't tired… less stressed". Another potential change related to schedules would be ensuring that COs are able to take regularly scheduled breaks, for example, for lunch. COs noted that due to understaffing and being busy, they often do not have time to eat or take a break. "Back then, I was a smoker also. So if we had enough staff, I would actually go take a break. But it didn't usually happen.

Another participant stated that smokers would often take regular breaks but that recently changed since he would have to leave the facility to smoke.

While one participant stated that he sought clinical help outside of the institution, few noted they were not aware of services that might have been available to them. Participants noted that clinical services were available to them after a traumatic event, for example, inmate suicide, but they tended not to use it. P2 discussed the incident of trauma,

> I dealt with some suicides and stuff; I'll call them traumatics… where they jumped off the pier and went splat inmates or hangings and stuff like that. And then transported them to the hospital and stuff, but I didn't feel I needed to talk to mental health about.

Others noted that services were available to them after a serious incident but not on a regular basis. Instead, participants noted that they tried to rely on the support of each other when possible.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how COs working in remote and rural areas perceive and mitigate work-related stress stemming from interpersonal conflict. I focused on COs who, at the time of the interview, were working or who have retired/separated from correctional facilities or in Alaska. The findings of this study reflect the high amount of stress COs face stemming from their work, mainly from interactions with other COs and the administration. It is evident that COs want to do a good job at their institutions but expressed concerns regarding the level of

communication and support they receive from the administration. This research also shows that COs attempt to balance role expectations required security measures, complete their daily work responsibilities, interacting with inmates and other COs while working overtime, and experiencing high levels of stress. Some participants reported coping well, with others reported utilizing poor coping strategies.

COs are not viewed as law enforcement; yet, they are tasked with safekeeping dangerous and violent criminals. They do that armed with handcuffs, radio, and pepper spray. They work long hours, they work holidays, but they do not get the same fanfare as their brothers and sisters, such as police, firemen, or EMTs. They are overlooked as they work behind the walls of prisons, away from the spotlight but in an attempt to make the world a safer place. This quote from P9 best describes the work of a CO

> When you walk down, and the tunnel is kind of bright at the beginning. But by the time you get to the end of the tunnel, it's dark… It's not the light; it's the feeling. You can feel it getting heavier as you get down towards the end of the tunnel. And by the time you get downstairs and go through to the door into the gym, you know, you're there, you're keyed up, you're fired up. Your mind is running 100 miles an hour on everything that could happen…You know that job can be slow as hell, it can just be nothing happen, you could have 12 hours of boredom. But somewhere in there, you might have 30 seconds of sheer absolute terror. And that's the way it was.

COs are parallel to police officers though they are separated by windowless walls, where they stand unrecognized and make sacrifices the public does not see. They do the

job because the job has to get done and do it, risking their lives. Failure to recognize the importance of their work and sacrifice is a failure to recognize that a CO would die on the inside for the same thing that the outside represents.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Are/were you a correctional officer working in Alaska?

You are invited to participate in a research study on how correctional officers (COs) deal with conflict and experience job-related stress. For this study, you will be asked to describe your work experiences as a correctional officer.

Study title: "Interpersonal Conflict and Work-Related Stress in Correctional Officers."

Benefits of study:

- Results of this study may help to better understand how COs experience job-related stress.

Criteria for participating:

- Be currently or previously employed as a CO with the department of corrections in Alaska.
- CO I, CO II and non-supervisory CO III positions; separated/former/retired COs are eligible.
- Willing to participate in an hour-long interview (via Zoom, Skype, facetime, or other method).
- Willing to have the interview audio-recorded with your consent during the interview. Audio-recording is done so that the interview can be transcribed.

Compensation:

- Each study participant will receive a $50 gift card at the conclusion of the study.

Other:

- Confidentiality will be maintained; your name or anything else that could identify you will not be used in the study reports.

This research is not conducted, funded, or endorsed by the Alaska Department of Corrections.

The approval for this study is: 03-19-21-061997.
Contact Information: Katarzyna (Kat) Sowa-Lapinskas
katarzyna.sowa-lapinskas@waldenu.edu or (907) 903-0934.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Study title:
Name of interviewee:
Date of interview: Start time: End time:
Interview method:
Recording mechanism:

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. My name is Katarzyna Sowa-Lapinskas, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I know we discussed this over the phone/via email, but let me go over it again. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of stress in correctional officers. I will be asking questions to get your perceptions of your experiences of stress and conflict at work. There are no right or wrong answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel.

Research Burden

All research activities place some amount of burden on the participants. This includes taking the time to participate, sharing personal information, and being subject to potential risks, which I will describe shortly.

Risks and benefits discussion

As noted in the consent form, there is minimal risk of participating in this study. Some of the risks include temporary distress after recalling unpleasant events and how you felt about them. If you start to feel uncomfortable and wish not to continue the interview, you may discontinue your participation at any time.

Your participation in this interview will help educate others about the challenges faced by COs that may impact training and workplace policies, creating a work environment free of interpersonal conflict and decreasing levels of stress experienced by staff.

Audio recorder discussion

If it is okay with you, I will be audio recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details and not miss anything, but also to be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I may not maintain eye contact during the interview, as I will also be taking notes.

I will email you a transcript of our interview, and you will have the opportunity to check it for accuracy and make changes if needed. You do not have to participate in that process, and you can decline to provide feedback. This process is used to ensure that I accurately captured our conversation and your answers. This interview will take approximately an hour to complete.

Consent Form discussion
Before we get started, I want to confirm that I have a copy of the signed consent form and want to make sure that you as well have one. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding the consent form you signed. I have a copy of it here if you would like to review it again.
If you have no questions, we can move on.

I want to remind you that, that you may decline to answer any question and you can withdraw from the interview at any time. If you would like to take a break during this interview, please let me know.
Do you have any questions before we begin?

I would like to begin by asking you:

Study inclusion question:	**Answer:**
Are you currently working as a CO I or CO II with the department of corrections in Alaska?	

Background question:	**Answer:**
For our next question, can you tell me a bit about you and your background? Educational level and discipline, job experience, family/friends, interests.	

Questions:	**Notes/Comments**
1. Tell me about a time when you had a disagreement or conflict with a coworker. What happened? Was it stressful? Why or why not?	
2. How did you deal with that stress? Were there any activities or thoughts that helped you cope with the stress? Were any of them helpful? If so, how, if not, why do you think you were not able to cope with the stress?	

3. Other than the event you described, what other kinds of stressors do you experience at work? Is there any part of your work that causes more stress? If you do not experience stress, do you have strategies to help avoid stress? If so, can you describe them?	
4. How do your coworkers and managers help you when you are stressed?	
5. How does conflict with coworkers affect your job as a correctional officer?	
6. How does stress affect your job as a correctional officer?	
7. Other than what you have already mentioned, are there any other strategies you use to reduce stress?	
8. Tell me about how you reduce stress levels outside of work?	
9. Are there strategies you could have used to reduce the stress in the specific event you mentioned in question one? What other types of strategies could they have used to assist in reducing your stress?	
10. What else can you tell me based on the topics we just discussed that would help me understand your experience?	

Conclusion:
I would like to thank you for your time today and your contribution to this research study. I do not have any more questions at this time. As noted earlier, I will email you a transcribed copy of this interview, and you will be able to respond with any comments or corrections you have.

Please confirm that I have the correct email on file.
Upon your request, the research results can be shared with you through email, 6 months after this interview date.

Do you have any questions or comments for me?

Again, I appreciate your time and participation.