

PTSD rate among prison employees equals that of war veterans

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Regions of the brain associated with stress and posttraumatic stress disorder.
Credit: National Institutes of Health

Prison employees experience PTSD on par with Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, a new study from a Washington State University College of Nursing researcher found.

Working conditions in a [prison](#) can include regular exposure to violence and trauma, and threats of harm to the workers and their families. Previous studies have shown that prison workers have some of the highest rates of mental illness, sleep disorders and [physical health issues](#) of all U.S. workers. But the rate of PTSD among prison workers isn't well understood.

The new study, "Prison employment and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#): Risk and [protective factors](#)," was conducted by lead investigator Lois James, Ph.D., assistant professor at the WSU College of Nursing, and co-investigator Natalie Todak, assistant professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

It recently was published in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* and excerpted in *Force Science News*.

"Prison employees can face some of the toughest [working conditions](#) of U.S. workers," said James, "yet limited evidence exists on the specific risk and protective factors to inform targeted interventions."

Among the study's findings:

- Prison employees work under an almost constant state of threat to their personal safety, and about a quarter of them routinely experience serious threats to themselves or their families.
- Almost half have witnessed co-workers being seriously injured by inmates.
- More than half have seen an inmate die or have encountered an inmate who recently died.
- The vast majority have dealt with inmates who were recently beaten and/or sexually assaulted.

PTSD rates were higher among women, black employees, and employees

with more than 10 years of experience. PTSD scores, using criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, didn't differ based on where the [employee](#) worked, such as a minimum versus maximum security facility.

James and Todak note that the research included a small sample of 355 employees of one labor union at the Washington State Department of Corrections, and recommended further study of the issue.

Still, they said their findings suggest the corrections profession could benefit from specific training to promote resilience. They also said issues common to nearly every workplace also can protect prison employees from PTSD, such as having good relationships with supervisors and coworkers, and liking their work assignments.

More information: Lois James et al, Prison employment and post-traumatic stress disorder: Risk and protective factors, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/ajim.22869](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.22869)

Provided by Washington State University

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