



Life on the inside

PSA survey on the working life
of New Zealand prison staff

The Public Service Association (PSA) is New Zealand's largest state sector union, with a growing membership at the Department of Corrections. The PSA is vitally concerned with rebuilding the public service and improving the jobs of public servants. As part of our plan to achieve these goals the PSA renewed a *Partnership for Quality* agreement with the Government in 2003.

Department of Corrections staff are under intense pressure as the New Zealand prison service attempts to accommodate a large, unforeseen rise in the number of people incarcerated as a result of new tougher sentencing laws.

Measures introduced to cope with the increasing inmate muster include double bunking, increased overtime, a major recruitment campaign and the building of new units in existing prisons.

PSA members say their pay and conditions are a significant barrier to them remaining in the prison service and most are expressing a desire to seek alternative employment.

Key findings:

We asked a representative sample of PSA members working for the Department about their jobs and career intentions¹. Separately we also asked all PSA members working for Corrections about their jobs.

- Nine out of ten (91%) have thought about leaving their current job in the past twelve months.
- A third (31%) are taking active steps to find a new job (applying for jobs or talking with recruitment consultants).
- The key reasons given for looking for alternative employment are for better pay and less stressful work.
- Safer work and better hours were also reasons given for looking for other work.

The PSA is willing to work constructively with the Department of Corrections to address these problems. Resolving them will require a commitment to fairer remuneration and adequate staffing.

¹ Survey methodology is detailed on page 5.

² Department of Corrections (1994), *Census of Prison Inmates and Home Detainees 2003*.

■ New Zealand's overcrowded prisons

New Zealand's prison system is under severe pressure

Our prison system is struggling to cope. New laws have led to longer sentences for many crimes and the preventive detention regime has been expanded to continue to detain indefinitely a significantly larger pool of offenders believed to pose a continued and serious threat to the public.

These changes were a response to calls from the general public to get tougher on crime (most notably through a citizens initiated referendum held with the 1999 general election and from lobby groups such as the Sensible Sentencing Trust). The PSA has not formed a view on the desirability of these changes; our concern is how they are impacting on the staff working for the Department of Corrections.

Prison numbers have been growing rapidly ...

The impact on current and predicted prison numbers is staggering. The number of inmates has grown by 47 per cent since 1991 (not counting home detainees) and proportionally fewer inmates are serving shorter sentences (sentences of 12 months or less)². New Zealand now has the second highest imprisonment rate in the western world; only the United States imprisons more people per head of population³.

Ministry of Justice inmate forecasts failed to predict this rapid rise in the number of people in custody. As a result the Department of Corrections has been frequently forced to accommodate prisoners and those on remand in police and court cells which don't have facilities for long-term incarceration. The extent to which prison and court cells are required to accommodate inmates fluctuates, but as at 17 January 2005 there were 163 inmates in this position because beds were not available for them in correctional facilities⁴.

... and latest forecasts predict an even larger inmate population by 2010

Inmate numbers are expected to continue to rise sharply – from 5,891 in the 2002/03 financial year to 7,340 by 2009/10⁵.

The government has embarked on a major building programme to develop new, larger regional prisons in several centres and to build additional beds at existing prisons to accommodate the extra inmates. In the *December Economic & Fiscal Update 2004*, the Government indicated it plans to spend \$426 million on constructing additional prison beds and a further \$388 million to make them operational over the next four years.

³ Department of Corrections (2001), *About Time: Turning People Away from a Life of Crime and Reducing Reoffending*.

⁴ Department of Corrections (2005), *Prisoners in Custody: Statistical Summary of Prisoners as at Unlock on 17 January 2005*, Report to the Minister of Corrections.

⁵ Ministry of Justice (2004), *Annual Update of Forecasts of the Prison Population* at <http://www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2004/prison-forecast/update.html>.

Prison staff are at the sharp end of these changes ...

PSA members working for the Department of Corrections acutely feel the impact of these changes in many ways.

Corrections policy is often the subject of intense, regularly negative, political and media debate which damages staff morale. Our members also report that this frequently translates into over-management and an emphasis on form-filling, rather than effective case management of inmates.

In order to manage the increasing number of inmates in the short term while new prison beds are constructed, the Corrections Department has increased the workload of existing staff. Staff are undertaking a large amount of overtime and in October 2004 the Department reached agreement with prison staff unions to allow double-bunking of inmates in some prisons. While staff are receiving additional remuneration the increased workload is not sustainable for more than a short period of time for staff safety reasons.

These problems come at the same time as the nature of the work Corrections staff undertake is undergoing significant change. A new employment agreement reached with staff in 1998 shifted them to a qualification-based salary structure. Corrections Officers must now complete unit standard based qualifications in order to obtain promotion and/or increase their income. Obtaining these qualifications is very time consuming and staff report that, owing to their increased workload, they are having to trade off career development with their inmate management duties. There are serious implications for the Department's future development if staff cannot complete the qualifications necessary to take up more senior positions.

As a result of all these factors our survey reveals our members are demoralised and feel undervalued and unsafe.

... and their conditions of employment present a serious obstacle

The working conditions and salaries of Corrections staff have failed to keep pace with other comparable occupational groups and the increasing demand for new prison staff.

During the 1990s under the Employment Contracts Act, prison staff found it difficult to bargain with their employer. Staff working for the prison service at the time were forced to agree to a significant loss of core conditions, including the removal of all service related pay increments, penal rates, allowances and a lessened annual leave entitlement for new staff. Staff can now only earn rates of pay similar to those they received in the 1990s by working significant amounts of overtime which impacts badly on their home and family lives.

The Department of Corrections will need to recruit 1,800 new staff in the next three years to cover for attrition, to staff the new prisons as they are commissioned, and for the additional beds within existing prisons. Inmate number forecasts through to 2010 indicate that staff numbers will need to rise further beyond this time.

The Department is currently conducting a large scale recruitment campaign. A significant proportion of the new staff are being recruited internationally following the easing of immigration requirements. It is questionable whether these new staff will have a long term commitment to the prison service once they have served the minimum required period with the Department of Corrections to meet residency requirements. This is particularly the case given the strength of the New Zealand employment market remains and the relative ease with which prison staff could find better paying, less stressful work elsewhere.

Recruiting new staff to meet workforce shortages does nothing to halt the attrition of existing staff. Our survey results predict this will be a major problem. The majority of PSA members are considering leaving the prison service and a significant proportion are taking active steps to do so. This problem must be addressed urgently.

■ How we obtained the information used in this report

We developed a one page questionnaire to gather information about PSA members' views about the recruitment and retention issues faced by the Department of Corrections. The questionnaire is reproduced on page 13. A small group of members assisted with the development of the questionnaire by providing feedback on a draft version.

A questionnaire and stamped self-addressed envelope was sent to a random sample of 117 PSA members working for the Department of Corrections. Fifty-eight completed questionnaires were returned: a response rate of 50%.

Seventy-two per cent of the sample were corrections officers (from all ranks). The remaining 28% comprised other occupational groups employed in prisons such as clerical and administrative staff and other professionals. Thirty-two per cent of those surveyed were female. This demographic profile reflects the PSA membership profile amongst prison staff.

The average age bracket of those surveyed was 45-49 years, and the average length of service was in the 10-14 year bracket.

Separately from the survey, we also asked all PSA prison staff members to tell us in their own words about working for the Public Prisons Service. In particular we were interested to hear about the impact of current staffing levels, what members consider is contributing to the recruitment and retention problems the Department is facing, and what it could do to make a career in the prison service more attractive.

We sought these personal stories to provide a qualitative set of data to supplement the quantitative information generated by the questionnaire. We have integrated both sets of information in this report so that readers gain a more complete picture of the experiences of staff working for the Department of Corrections.

■ Working conditions

We were interested in the level of workplace violence and the threat of violence as this has been suggested as a possible contributor to recruitment and retention problems. Respondents also identified other workplace cultural issues which make working for the prison service less attractive.

What we found

- 7% said they had been assaulted at work in the last 12 months
- 55% said they had been threatened with harm at work in the last 12 months
- 19% said they had sought help because of workplace stress

What respondents told us about their working conditions

- “ I have worked for the Public Prisons Service for 18 months; in this time I have had many bad experiences.
Our hours of work are unsociable, having a major impact on our personal life and our relationships.
I have seen a number of officers physically attacked and some result in great injury.
A lot of staff have left the job for other positions where they work normal hours, have a smaller stress load and earn a lot more money – and yet their lives are not in danger every day as they go to work.
I have peers on the verge of mental breakdowns just hanging in by a thread and other peers looking for other jobs. In fact I could name about ten staff who have mentioned they want another job and are actively looking for other employment.
Who's going to look after all the prisoners if we continue to get underpaid and other companies offer better salary packages, better hours and a smaller workload? When we tell the truth about our jobs how many people can you see raising their hands wanting to do this as a career?”
- “ Eight hours on the floor is eight hours on the floor. We get no tea breaks away from inmates to recharge our batteries, just a constant workload. The rosters are TERRIBLE.”
- “ Oversize jobs in which incumbents rely heavily on the goodwill of other staff. I don't know how long the goodwill will survive!”
- “ Rosters! I often work 8-10 days in a row as part of my roster. I get called at 5am asking me if I want to work on my day off. Management are not approachable.”
- “ A dangerous environment, combined with 24/7 commitment, at times a very negative place to work which seems to feed on itself through both staff and inmates.”
- “ Bad management of staff. Lack of professionalism. Bad staff conditions. Pay too low. Staff not appreciated. Staff not valued. Lack of communication. Decisions being made at a national level without consultation with those on the prison floor.”

■ Has the nature of the work prison staff do changed?

Respondents were asked questions designed to test the anecdotal reports that work demands had intensified in recent years.

What we found

Ninety-eight per cent of respondents reported that work had intensified on at least one of these indicators. We asked about their case management load, the number of tasks they had to do and the complexity of work since the Sentencing Act was passed.

- 83% (of those who indicated that this question applied to them) reported that their case management load had increased.
17% said their case management load had remained the same.
None said that their case management load had decreased.
- 93% reported that they had a greater number of tasks to do.
7% said they had the same number of tasks to do.
None said they had less tasks to do.
- Of those who responded to the question about the introduction of the Sentencing Act 2002, 81% said the complexity of the work they did was harder than before.
19% said the complexity of their work was the same since the introduction of the Act.
None said the complexity of their work had lessened since the introduction of the Act.

What respondents told us about how their workload had changed

- “ Unrealistic salaries mean recruitment problems. The increased administrative responsibility leaves less time for custodial duties (core duties) making the job more dangerous and stressful.”
- “ Poor pay for increased responsibility and workload (now doing sentence planning and post-sentence assessments, etc).”

■ Are prison staff looking for alternative employment?

We wanted to know if respondents had considered leaving their job and whether or not they had actively sought other work. We asked a series of standard job search questions.

What we found

- 91% of respondents had thought about leaving their current job in the last twelve months.
- 31% have taken active steps to search for another job, that is either applied for another job or approached a recruitment agency.
- When we included looking through situations vacant advertisements as a job search activity we found that 64% are seeking other jobs.

What respondents told us about looking for alternative employment

- “ My wife started as an officer in 1985. Her pay packet was over \$1400 for a two week period. I remember being stunned by the amount and by what she had to do to earn that vast amount 20 years ago.

The point I want to make is that either she and other officers were grossly overpaid back then or I and today's officers, especially those on the new pay scale, are grossly underpaid. I am on \$36,000, and I won't go into details about the difference in job description between the two eras, but I guarantee that today's officers have a lot more work on their plate.

The Department in their infinite wisdom let these officers go, and then actively comb the streets for replacements playing the old numbers game.”

- “ I have decided to leave the Corrections Department due to lack of parity with similar jobs, i.e. Police.

The job can be stressful, never knowing when a detoxing inmate is likely to become violent and 24/7 nature of the job not being family friendly. My new job pays considerably more money and the hours are better for the family.”

- “ Salaries are too low. We're attracting only lower skilled people. Skilled staff move on within two years as the pay is low and doesn't increase quickly enough.”

■ Why are prison staff looking for alternative employment?

We asked those who had thought about leaving, the reasons for considering other work. Respondents were able to circle more than one reason, therefore the percentages do not sum to 100%.

What we found

- 70% said they were seeking better pay
- 70% said they wanted less stress
- 47% wanted safer work
- 36% wanted better hours
- 26% were seeking promotion
- 25% said it was time for a change
- 13% wanted more challenging work
- Of the 11% who identified other reasons, half referred to problems with management, and the other reasons were job size, job satisfaction and the work environment.

What respondents told us about why they were searching for alternative employment

- “ Money is definitely an issue.”
- “ Salaries are insufficient as compared to a 1st year police constable!”
- “ I am a nurse and my wage is lower than the hourly rate I would get for the experience I have had.”
- “ The job market has loosened up – there's better prospects and pay and conditions elsewhere.”
- “ High turnover at the moment as staff are sick of low wages and management treat them like inmates.”

■ Why do prison staff think the Department of Corrections is experiencing recruitment and retention problems?

We invited respondents to tell us why they thought Corrections was having difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. Most referred to low pay, problems with management and better employment prospects elsewhere.

What they told us?

- “ I took part in a recent recruitment drive, driving a van with nine potential recruits. Of the nine, three said to me that the reason why they were not going to apply was the salary.”
- “ Quite simply, there are a lot of jobs out there for more pay and less stress. Also if you have a mortgage and/or family, 40k a year is the ABSOLUTE BARE MINIMUM starting wage otherwise it's just a struggle from pay to pay.”
- “ Low unemployment rate offers better, safer employment in areas of lower stress for a similar salary.”
- “ On two occasions in the last month competent people have asked me about joining the prison service and this has resulted in them not even bothering when they found out what the starting salary was.
Both have extensive military backgrounds. One is self-employed and when his wife found out the hours of work and how often you get a weekend off (they have three small children) she was shocked to say the least. The other person is single, working in an engineering shop doing 48 hours per week and earning \$47,000. His response was unprintable!”
- “ I have been employed in the prison service for more than twenty years and have held a number of positions. However our conditions of work and pay have degenerated to a point where I am too embarrassed to encourage anyone to join this service. I no longer go out of my way to tell people what a great job this is. Why? Because I wouldn't be able to do that to someone I thought highly of.”

■ What are the solutions to these problems?

The PSA survey reveals two major issues which must be addressed if the Department of Corrections is to retain its existing workforce and recruit the large number of additional prison officers it projects it will need. These issues are:

- addressing prison staff salaries and the flawed methodology by which they are currently set, and
- what are adequate and safe staffing levels in the current prison environment.

Addressing prison staff salaries

The Department of Corrections, in common with many public sector agencies, sets salary levels by using a job evaluation process to 'size' jobs and then applies a 'market rate' to that evaluation.

This pay fixing process is particularly problematic when applied within the Department of Corrections. The process effectively excludes unions from bargaining around pay in favour of an artificial 'market' which takes no account or recognition of the working environment on the salary system. In fact such factors are specifically and deliberately excluded.

Salaries for prison staff are currently set by comparison with the "public sector median" salary rates for equivalent sized jobs. Factors such as the constant threat of attack, constant need for vigilance and threats to family members are not included in any comparison. In addition, prison staff who work across a 24 hour-a-day and 7-day-week period are having their nett 40 hour salary compared with 8 hour, 5 day-a-week workers.

The PSA does not support 'market' pay systems for public sector workers, but it would be much fairer to compare prison staff with like occupational groups. Prison Officers' incomes (both gross and nett) have fallen in relationship to police officers and probation officers to name but two groups.

Comparing the Collective Employment Contract/Agreements for Probation Officers (CPS) from the third quarter of 1993 to the third quarter of 2004 illustrates a 44.1% movement in the Probation Officers' starting rate. In the same time span Corrections Officers (PPS) moved by 19.1%.

In the case of the police salary system, after allowing for superannuation, insurance and physical competency payment, the appropriate starting salary for police officers is \$41,000 compared to \$33,810 for a corrections officer.

However the problem is not confined to custodial staff in prisons. Administration staff, nurses, tutors, social workers, librarians and many site level managers working in the Department of Corrections have all lost ground in relation to their counterparts in, for example, the probation service.

In the tight labour market New Zealand is currently experiencing, where Corrections staff have a greater ability to find alternative employment, the failure of the pay system to acknowledge the nature of working in a prison environment manifests itself much more obviously. The high percentage of PSA prison staff members who reported to us that they are considering, as well as seeking, alternative employment makes this very point very clearly.

Ensuring adequate and safe staffing levels

In light of the experience of staffing levels set under the Workplace Development Project, the changing nature of prison inmates and recent changes to health and safety legislation staffing levels need to be re-examined.

Partnership for Quality

The PSA is committed to working with the Department of Corrections to resolve the issues our survey identifies. The relation of salaries and working conditions to recruitment and retention is obvious, but we also believe that wider workplace culture issues need to be addressed.

We have agreed to join a working party to look at all these issues, subject to joint agreement on terms of reference for such a group and the inclusion of remuneration as one of the issues to be discussed.

PRISON STAFF SURVEY

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. We are surveying a random sample of Corrections members in order to gather information about recruitment and retention issues. We will use the information to present the case for improvements in pay and conditions. We are also separately asking all members in Corrections to tell us about the recruitment and retention issues they are currently facing.

Disclosure of information: your name or any other information that could identify you will remain private.

1. Working Conditions (please circle)

In the last 12 months have you:

Been assaulted at work Been threatened with harm
Sought help because of workplace stress

2. Changes to your current job (please circle)

Has your case management load:

Increased Decreased Stayed the same Not applicable to my job

Are the number of tasks you do:

More than before Less than before The same

Since the introduction of the Sentencing Act 2002, is the complexity of the work you do:

Harder than before Easier than before The same

3. Job search activities (please circle)

In the last 12 months have you:

Thought about leaving your current job Thought about applying for another job
Applied for other jobs Talked to a recruitment agency
Looked at situations vacant advertisements

If you circled any of the job search questions please circle the reasons for seeking another job

Better pay Less stress Safer work Time for a change Better hours

Prospects of promotion More challenging work Other

4. Why do you think Corrections is experiencing recruitment and retention problems?

.....
.....

Thank you for completing this survey.

Background Information (please circle)

What is your job title _____

Male Female

Age under 25 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49
50-54 55+

Length of service 0-2 years 3-5 yrs 5-9 yrs 10-14 yrs 15-19yrs 20-24 yrs
25 yrs or more

Current salary \$25K-29K \$30K-34K \$35K-39K \$40K-44 \$45K-49K \$50K+

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