

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

Onboarding Program: Exploring Correctional Officer Experiences

The Onboarding Program helps to support Correctional Officers in their transition into the correctional environment.

Why we are doing this study

In order to support the transition of new Correctional Officers (COs) from the Training Academy to the correctional environment, an Onboarding Program is being piloted at Kent institution. The program has several components throughout a CO's first year of employment that extend beyond On-the-Job Training, including structured shadowing, mentor support, and a strong emphasis on values and ethics. This research aims to examine the effectiveness of the Onboarding Program through the consideration of its impact on both COs and on the broader institutional environment. More specifically, the purpose is to examine whether the Onboarding Program can enhance the transfer of skills from training to the realities of the correctional environment, while solidifying the integration of the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) values and ethics. This research is a collaboration between the Research Branch and the Learning and Development Branch.

What we are doing

As part of a larger study, 32 COs participating in the Onboarding Program completed an online questionnaire at the 6-week mark of their employment at Kent Institution. Questions focused on the nature and effectiveness of the training, the transfer of skills, work relationships, as well as on the correctional orientation and culture amongst COs. Thematic analyses were performed on open-ended responses, and descriptive analyses were conducted on quantitative data.

What we have found so far

Mentors were highly regarded as supportive and approachable on the measure of work relationships. These findings were further evidenced through remarkably positive feedback provided by COs. Mentors were viewed as instrumental in providing consistency and a "familiar face", cultivating an inviting atmosphere where COs feel comfortable asking questions and mentors are willing to assist. COs also emphasized the value of the one-on-one training offered by mentors. Of note, there was a positive correlation between COs with a rehabilitation orientation and positive views of mentors ($r = .46, p = .007$). Therefore, COs with positive mentor relationships also held attitudes supporting the rehabilitation of offenders.

It was commonly indicated that the Onboarding Program helps guide new COs in their transition from the Training Academy into the operational setting, with regards to reinforcing fundamental competencies and transferring skills developed in training. Further, a positive correlation was found between COs with strong CSC values and ethics and those who regarded the program as effective in transferring skills to the correctional environment ($r = .65, p < .001$). While feedback indicated that the program permits COs to receive additional training on control posts, areas of potential improvement were identified. Recommendations were made for more detail and more time to be allocated for training on certain control posts, as well as to have training responsibilities designated exclusively to more senior staff.

Two diverging themes emerged concerning the staff and culture of the institution. The majority of COs reflected on positive experiences, describing the environment and staff as welcoming, with many willing to assist and share their knowledge with the new COs. Conversely, undesirable experiences were highlighted, whereby responses indicated the presence of an "old school" mentality amongst some staff. These staff are viewed as dismissive and distrusting towards the new COs, and seemed to be overwhelmed by the number of new COs starting and the amount of training required of them.

What it means

The initial feedback suggests that the Onboarding Program is a promising approach to complement existing training and facilitate the integration of new COs. While these early experiences are valuable, impacts on the broader culture at Kent Institution remain to be assessed. Ongoing research on the Onboarding Program is expected to more comprehensively explore its long-term impacts with a larger sample and in comparison to other new COs receiving traditional 3-week On-the-Job Training.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#). You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

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