

**STERLING**  
CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

**PRIN**

**REPORT**



UNIVERSITY *of*  
DENVER

# OUR STORY

## OUR PURPOSE

The Prison Research and Innovation Network is a five-state collective to improve the wellbeing of people who live and work in prisons. The Network, or "PRIN," includes prisons and research teams in Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Missouri, and Vermont. Teams were selected by the Urban Institute to receive a grant from Arnold Ventures.<sup>1</sup>

In Colorado, PRIN is a voluntary partnership between Sterling Correctional Facility (SCF) and a research team at the University of Denver. Together, we are working to improve outcomes for incarcerated people and correctional staff using data and collaborative decision-making.

This report presents a comprehensive assessment of the environment at SCF based on facility and department records, a population-level survey of both incarcerated people and corrections staff, and more than 120 hours of in-depth interviews.

The findings of this report will be used in collaborative processes at SCF to design and test policies and interventions that are responsive to the needs of those who live and work in the prison.

If you have come here to help me,  
you are wasting your time. But if  
you have come because your  
liberation is bound up with mine,  
then let us work together.

*Lilla Watson, activist*

## OUR PARTNERSHIP

In 2019, administrators from the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC), the management of Sterling Correctional Facility (SCF), and a team of researchers from the University of Denver (DU) began to discuss ways to improve prison outcomes through data-driven decision making. A partnership was formalized in 2020, when CDOC, SCF, and DU were awarded a collaborative grant from the Urban Institute and Arnold Ventures to conduct an action--research project as part of the national Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN).

DU professors Shannon Sliva (Graduate School of Social Work) and Jeffrey Lin (Department of Sociology and Criminology) held a series of meetings at SCF to better understand the needs of the prison and the possibilities for change. Three decision-making bodies were formed to advise the project:

- *An Incarcerated Advisory Board*, comprised of 20 incarcerated people, representing various identities, interests, and perspectives at SCF.
- *A Staff Advisory Board*, comprised of 20 corrections staff members, representing various lines, job assignments, and perspectives at SCF.
- *A Steering Committee*, comprised of researchers and upper managers, focused on managing logistics and communication.

Together, researchers and community members designed the research so that it would accurately capture the experiences and needs of incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF. It is our hope that all voices are represented in this report, and in the work to come.

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, Arnold Ventures, its trustees, or its funders.

# OUR STORY

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

The research team quickly discovered that the prison is a complex environment characterized by competing needs, interests, and goals. As a result, we feel that it is important to clearly articulate our guiding values in this research process.

### ***The Community Is An Expert.***

Complex social problems cannot be solved by "experts" from the outside. Community knowledge is irreplaceable and should be included at every phase of research.

### ***Your Data Belong to You.***

Research is not a tool to be wielded only by those in power. All data gathered belong to the community. Results are shared transparently, while protecting everyone's identity.

### ***The Research is in Service to the Community.***

Communities are not objects to be studied because they are "interesting." Research is always done in service to the greater good of the community, to promote positive action.

### ***The Research Serves Everyone.***

Prisons are complex power structures characterized by competing interests. This research elevates all voices in their own words and promotes solutions that benefit everyone.

### ***More is Possible When We Work Together.***

Making decisions behind closed doors reinforces existing realities. This research involves as many people as possible to generate new solutions to old problems.

## PRIN Project Partners

### *Incarcerated Advisory Board*

Mr. C. Ashley  
Mr. D. Bumphus  
Mr. J. Burrell  
Mr. G. Chavez  
Mr. J. Colerick  
Mr. C. Cumby  
Mr. P. Goodwin  
Mr. B. Hankins  
Mr. D. Lyons  
Ms. R. Martin  
Mr. T. McGrath  
Mr. J. Montoya  
Mr. C. Moreno  
Mr. T. Mosley  
Mr. B. Phillips  
Mr. D. Piggee  
Mr. S. Reed  
Mr. W. Walters

### *Staff Advisory Board*

Ms. J. Book  
Ms. M. Bowman  
Off. C. Cardenas  
Dr. H. Christner  
Off. T. Cockcroft  
Sgt. R. Cook  
Ms. V. Cowne  
Lt. J. Diaz  
Lt. S. Frank  
Sgt. S. Grilli  
Ms. R. Haupt  
Ms. A. Karr  
Sgt. H. Koons  
Off. J. Ralston  
Lt. K. Richie  
Sgt. J. Ruiz  
Ms. M. Saffer  
Lt. D. Schellenger  
Sgt. J. Shannon  
Ms. B. Steele  
Ms. R. Stieb  
Mr. A. Thode

### *Steering Committee*

Warden J. Long  
Captain N. MacIntosh  
Captain J. Mitchell  
Major D. Owens  
Major K. Reyes  
Captain W. Sherwood  
Assoc. Warden Zwirn  
Dr. Jeffrey Lin  
Dr. Shannon Sliva

### *Research Team*

Dr. Jeffrey Lin, Co-PI  
Dr. Shannon Sliva, Co-PI  
Catherine Dempsey, Research Asst.  
Tyler Miyoshi Han, Research Asst.  
Danielle Littman, Research Asst.  
T'Shana McClain, Research Asst.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the initial assessment in an action research project at Sterling Correctional Facility (SCF), in partnership with researchers at the University of Denver. It presents the findings of a multi-method research inquiry about living and working at SCF based on facility and department records, a population-level survey of both corrections staff and incarcerated people, and more than 120 hours of in-depth interviews. All data were collected between March and October 2021. The findings will be used in data-driven collaborative processes to improve conditions and outcomes at SCF. The research is overseen by the Urban Institute and funded by Arnold Ventures as part of the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN)—a five-state collective using research to improve the wellbeing of people who live and work in prisons.

## Findings Related to the Purpose of Prison, Incarcerated People, and Corrections Staff

Corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF have high levels of agreement about the purpose of prison: to ensure public safety, prevent crime, and help people make changes for a better life. 80-90% of corrections staff at SCF indicate a helping orientation toward their work, saying that they see it as part of their job to assist incarcerated people in reaching their goals, and that they enjoy doing so. However, corrections staff at SCF experience role conflict, including conflicts between security and service functions, as well as conflicts about the role of punishment.

Many corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF report lacking a sense of purpose, leading to low morale, loss of motivation, and hopelessness in their lives and work. Incarcerated people at SCF describe high levels of personal purpose, including helping others, bettering themselves, and making amends for past behaviors and to those who they have harmed. However, incarcerated people at SCF say they have few opportunities to grow, to serve their communities, or to make amends while at SCF, and indicate that their time in prison is not productive. Only 37% of incarcerated people indicate that they have a purpose at SCF.

## Findings Related to the Prison Environment, Human Needs, and Safety

Many incarcerated people and corrections staff report feeling unsafe while living and working at SCF. Both groups experience physical violence, and more frequently, verbal threats and abuse. Incarcerated people report experiences of feeling threatened by other incarcerated people, by corrections staff, and specifically by gang violence in the prison. Both incarcerated people and corrections staff describe traumatic experiences and show symptoms of trauma, including hypervigilance, desensitization, and rumination. Many incarcerated people and correctional staff do not feel they get the support they need to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Incarcerated people at SCF also report experiences common to the prison environment: deprivation, isolation, and dehumanization. Deprivations include reduced access to nutritious food, hygiene supplies and other basics, sleep, privacy, comfort, and the natural environment. Corrections staff have differing opinions on whether these issues are as severe as incarcerated people report. Incarcerated people are negatively impacted by the prison environment, describing the onset of mental health problems, social anxieties, institutionalization, and criminalization. Corrections staff also experience negative impacts of the environment, including stress, sadness, and hypervigilance.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Findings Related to the Work Environment, Staffing, and Leadership

SCF is in a difficult place organizationally. While the incarcerated population has recently decreased, so have staffing levels. Retirements, departures, and illnesses have left the facility with a nearly 20% vacancy rate at some points. This has become an increasing burden during the COVID pandemic as staff members are shuffled to posts they do not typically work and more staff are required to work overtime and double shifts. Management has also been under pressure during this time, with many demands forced upon them due the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic.

Many staff perceive management as disconnected from the day-to-day realities of the facility, and often, managerial decisions as arbitrary and ill-informed. There is also growing tension as management rolls out "pro-offender" policies and practices that many staff perceive to be dangerous or compromising of their boundaries with incarcerated people. Corrections staff generally want more opportunities to give input, better communication about changes, and more support from management to do their jobs safely. In addition, a substantial number of staff point to pay inequities, opaque evaluation and promotion processes, and inadequate training and mentorship as contributing to low morale.

Staff relationships are another source of stress in the institution. Staff generally get along with one another and often find support from colleagues, but many say that "toxic staff," "dirty staff," staff who are "retired on duty," and others who do not do their job well make things more stressful and dangerous for everyone.

## Findings Related to Programs and Opportunities for Incarcerated People

Incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF agree on the importance of programming and vocational opportunities to help incarcerated people succeed upon release. Many say that programs help incarcerated people meet their goals and prepare for re-entry, reduce idle time, and create positive interactions between incarcerated people, staff, and community volunteers. A substantial majority of incarcerated people report that they want meaningful work that offers a purpose or benefit to themselves and others, that provides job training they can use in the community, and that pays enough to meet their needs, support their families, and pay restitution and court costs.

SCF offers a range of programs and vocational opportunities, including some innovative community-based job placements. However, available program spots are too limited and COVID has made this situation worse. Many incarcerated people are ineligible to participate. In addition, the limited number of seats in programs and for "good jobs" makes selection extremely competitive. Many incarcerated people are frustrated with their inability to participate, and think that favoritism is a major factor in terms of who gets selected for useful programs and jobs.

Incarcerated people are often bored and feel powerless to participate in programming that will help them meet their goals, including preparing for parole. More broadly, they are unsure about what they need to do to meet their parole requirements, and receive little helpful feedback about parole denials.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Findings Related to Healthcare, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Treatment

Incarcerated people at SCF have a high volume of health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment needs. In addition, they report that living in prison contributes to poor overall health due to the lack of nutritious food, the high stress environment, and the lack of available treatment. Many incarcerated people say that health, mental health, and substance abuse problems negatively impact daily interactions in the prison, their quality of life and overall wellbeing, and their prospects for successful reentry to the community.

Staffing levels in the health and behavioral health departments at SCF are critically low. Doctors, nurses, and behavioral health professionals say they have unmanageable caseloads, meaning that medical care and mental health treatment are primarily allocated to emergency or crisis situations. These issues have gotten worse as SCF has been overwhelmed by COVID.

Substance abuse treatment needs are the most common health needs described by incarcerated people, but the least treated inside the prison. In addition, addictions are perpetuated by the easy availability of alcohol and drugs. There are long waitlists for only a few spots in SCF's Therapeutic Community, and few other treatment options for incarcerated people. Incarcerated people and behavioral health staff say many security staff do not recognize mental health and substance abuse symptoms, and use disciplinary rather than treatment approaches in response.

## Findings Related to the Importance of Relationships Inside and Across the Walls

The families and friends of incarcerated people are a key source of support, stability, and hope. Under SCF's current visitation and phone policies, 72% of incarcerated people say they are able to remain in touch. However, incarcerated people want more - and more meaningful - interactions with their family and others in the community. They say that maintaining relationships is challenging because of money, logistics, and technological issues.

Mutual support among incarcerated people is common, and is also a key source of comfort and purpose. While tension and conflict are part of daily life in SCF, so are positive, supportive interactions. Incarcerated people frequently offer one another friendship, advice, and mentorship, and also help one another by sharing resources with those in need.

Relationships with corrections staff are also important to incarcerated people. While incarcerated people report many negative interactions with staff, they report many positive interactions as well. Incarcerated people wish for better communication from staff, and more fair, consistent treatment. They acknowledge an "us versus them" mentality among both staff and incarcerated people, as well as a desire for more positive, supportive relationships.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Findings Related to Imagining Change within the Context of the Institution

Corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF both demonstrate high levels of support for improving the quantity and quality of reentry programs and job training opportunities, addressing critical staffing levels at SCF, improving the quality of interactions and communication across the facility, and examining accountability structures for both corrections staff and incarcerated people.

Incarcerated people at SCF also imagine expanded access to medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, safe access to technology, better ways to connect with their families and the community, and improved food, sleep, and privacy. Incarcerated people consistently emphasize the need to provide equal opportunities for all. Corrections staff at SCF also imagine changes related to their role as leaders and workers, including developing the workforce, removing and reassigning problematic staff, and increasing training, support, and communication.

Corrections staff at SCF want reforms to be safe, to effectively deter people from prison, and to be respectful to crime victims. Incarcerated people want reforms to be meaningful, not just surface-level. Importantly, many incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF say they have unused knowledge, skills, and talents that, if mobilized, could create meaningful changes for everyone in the institution.

Incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF both demonstrate high levels of skepticism about the likelihood of positive change. They say that positive change will require vision, planning, communication, and support, as well as everyone's efforts working together. Incarcerated people and corrections staff are concerned about resistance to change from the institution, from current corrections staff, and from the community at large.

### Research Note: This Report and COVID-19

This report presents the results of independent research conducted by a multi-disciplinary research team at the University of Denver. Data were collected at Sterling Correctional Facility between March and October 2021. During this time period, departments of corrections across the nation were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At SCF, incarcerated people experienced additional restrictions on movement, dramatically reduced contact with their loved ones, and a significant reduction in programming due to reduced staffing levels, public health precautions related to gathering, and the shuttering of the prison to outside volunteers. Corrections staff faced heightening turnover, were increasingly held over for double shifts, and were thrust into unexpected roles to fill gaps in staffing due to illness and quarantine requirements. There was widespread frustration over rapidly changing public health directives and controversy over state and departmental policy responses. Amid all this, both incarcerated people and staff experienced serious illnesses and deaths. In short, the period of study reflects a particularly difficult moment at SCF, as well as an opportune moment to identify new creative responses to institutional challenges.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>I</b>   | Our Purpose, Partnership, and Philosophy                    |
| <b>III</b> | Executive Summary   |
| <b>1</b>   | About Sterling Correctional Facility                        |
| <b>3</b>   | The People Who Live and Work Here                           |
| <b>8</b>   | What is Our Purpose in this Place?                          |
| <b>14</b>  | The Prison Environment: Human Needs and Safety              |
| <b>29</b>  | The Work Environment: Staffing and Leadership               |
| <b>42</b>  | Programs and Opportunities for Incarcerated People          |
| <b>52</b>  | Accessing Health Care and Treatment for Incarcerated People |
| <b>60</b>  | Relationships Inside and Across the Walls                   |
| <b>71</b>  | Imagining Change at SCF                                     |
| <b>83</b>  | Appendix A: Research Methods                                |



# ABOUT **STERLING** CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

## **Sterling Correctional Facility**

Opened in 1999, Sterling Correctional Facility (SCF) is Colorado's largest state prison. It currently holds 1,945 incarcerated men and transgender women at Minimum, Minimum-restricted and Medium custody levels, as well as Management Control Custody (MCC), a Close custody designation providing increased supervision and control. SCF employs 640 staff including security staff, teachers, case managers, librarians, health and behavioral professionals, and physical plant operators.

## **A Unique Moment in Colorado**

The current historical moment in the United States, in Colorado, and at Sterling Correctional Facility is unique. It is a time of significant correctional change in Colorado. Governor Jared Polis, elected in 2018, appointed Dean Williams as the Executive Director of CDOC. Mr. Williams has led an aggressive campaign to change the culture and practices of correctional agencies in Colorado with the explicit goal of reducing recidivism through a number of innovative mechanisms. Under the moniker of "normalization," CDOC has promoted changes that attempt to make prison life more similar to life on the outside so that incarcerated people can be better prepared for reentry. SCF has been at the forefront of these changes, implementing policy shifts such as open movement on the east side of the facility, relaxing the dress code for incarcerated people, and developing more meaningful programmatic and vocational opportunities.

However, these efforts have stalled as COVID has overwhelmed facility operations. The COVID pandemic has upended normal life in the community and forced major adjustments to correctional practices as correctional authorities attempt to manage the ever-changing pandemic in extremely difficult spaces.

Nationally and statewide, a polarized political climate, intense public health debates, and evolving portrayals of both crime and policing present challenging realities. In addition, workforces are strained across a number of industries, including health care, education, and other essential services. CDOC and SCF are situated within this complex environment, and must attempt to respond to both internal and external variables that will affect the success of any change efforts.

## **The Colorado Department of Corrections in 2022**

### **Vision**

Building a safer Colorado for today and tomorrow.

### **Mission**

To protect the citizens of Colorado by holding offenders accountable and engaging them in opportunities to make positive behavioral changes and become law-abiding citizens.

### **Value Statements**

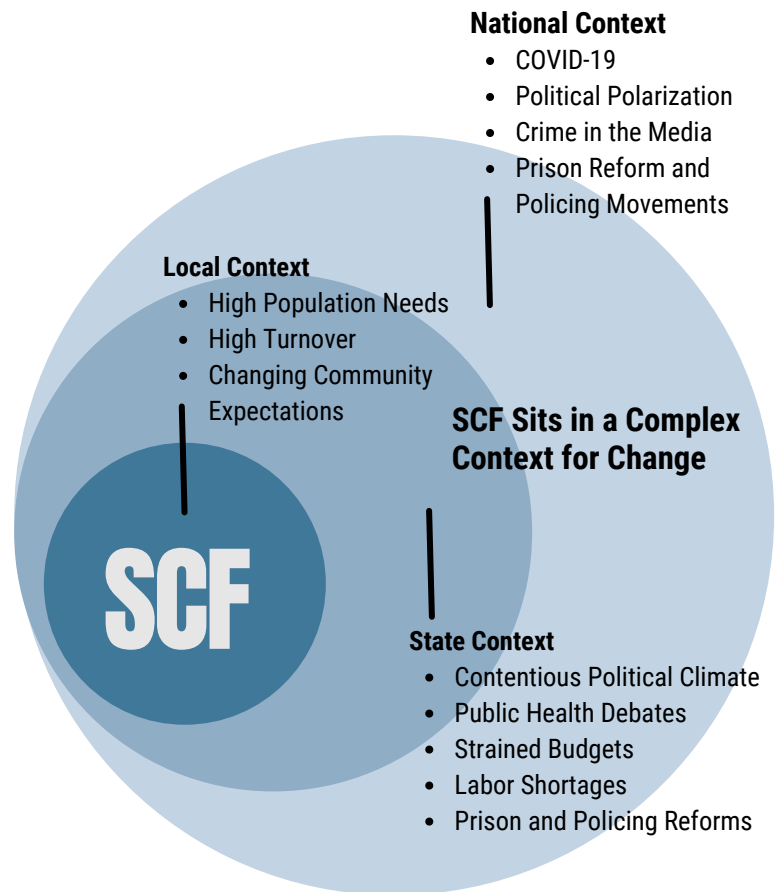
Our staff is our greatest resource. We support a professional, empowered workforce that embodies honesty, integrity, and ethical behavior. We honor and respect the rights of victims. We respect the individual differences of our staff and offender populations and seek to safeguard the safety, dignity, and well-being of all. We strive to deliver correctional services with optimal efficiency. We engage in effective correctional practices that produce measurable outcomes. We are committed to exceptional customer service. We are dedicated to providing opportunities for offender success. Our success is achieved through mission-focused collaboration.

# ABOUT **STERLING** CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

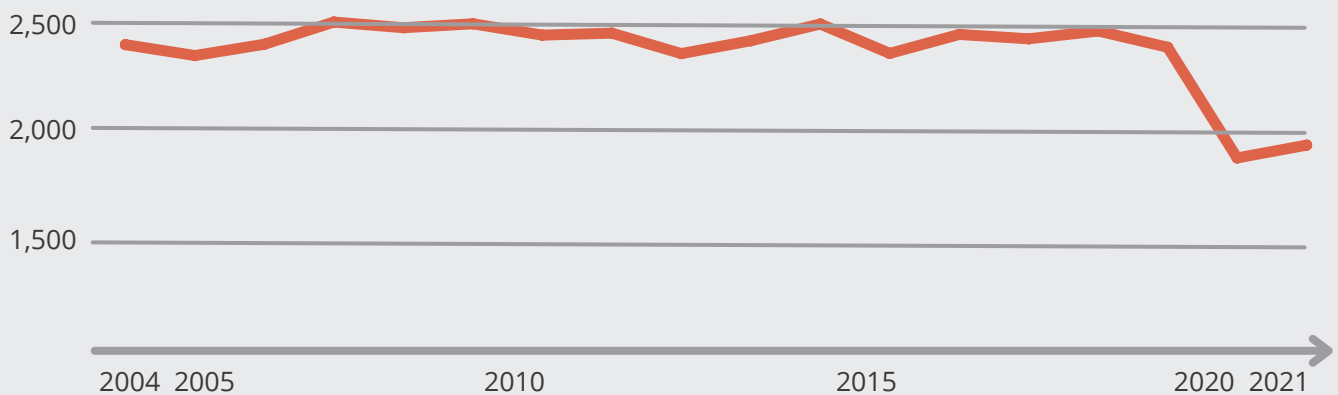
## Population Change at SCF

For most of the time it has been open, SCF has operated at near-capacity population levels. In 2020, operational capacity declined from 2,488 to 2,188. In response to changes in operational capacity and releases due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the incarcerated population dropped sharply in 2020. In 2020 and 2021, SCF has continued to supervise population levels significantly below facility capacity.

Also, in 2021, CDOC reassigned SCF's Close custody population to the Centennial Correctional Facility, with the exception of those in the Management Control Custody (MCC) designation. As a result, the population shifted in terms of security level. Currently the majority of incarcerated people are held in Medium custody (55.4%). About one-third (32.4%) are classified as Minimum-Restricted, 9.3% are classified as Close custody (MCC), and very few (2.9%) are classified as Minimum custody.



## Incarcerated Population Change at SCF, 2004-2021



# ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF SCF

## Understanding the People Who Live and Work Here

We use several sources of information to understand the people who live and work at SCF, and subsequently, the issues explored in this report.

- The first are official records from CDOC.
- The second are survey responses, collected from 25% of all incarcerated people and 47% of all corrections staff at SCF.
- The third are in-depth interviews with incarcerated people and corrections staff, in which they tell us about their backgrounds and values.

### A Note on Sampling

It should be noted that neither survey nor interview data can be confirmed to represent the whole population. For instance, people who filled out a survey could feel more positively or more negatively on average than people who did not fill one out. However, we show here that survey and interview respondents align well demographically with the general population. In addition, strong response rates, triangulation of data, and various data checks give us confidence in the data presented here. For more information on study methods and the trustworthiness of this report, please see Appendix A.

## Who Are the People Incarcerated at SCF?

### CDOC Records

All 1,945 people incarcerated at SCF are classified as male in official CDOC records, although survey data show that a significant number identify as female or transgender. Incarcerated people are classified as 42% white, 32% Hispanic/Latino, 21% black, and 4% other races. The average age of incarcerated people at SCF is 40.8; the youngest is 19 while the oldest is 86.

### Survey Data

490 (25%) incarcerated people at SCF completed a research survey for this project in October 2020. The survey allowed participants to select multiple races and ethnicities from a larger number of categories; therefore it is difficult to make direct comparisons to official records. However the data shows a diverse sample. Those who completed the survey were older than overall facility averages. In addition, 2.5% of incarcerated survey respondents are transgender women and 1.0% are non-binary people, and 18% are veterans.

### Interview Data

63 incarcerated people at SCF completed a research interview for this project between June and August 2021. Interviewees were slightly more likely to be Black and less likely to be Latino than overall facility averages.

## Characteristics of Incarcerated People at SCF (% among those reporting)

|                                  | CDOC Records<br>(n = 1,945) | Survey Sample<br>(n = 490) | Interview Sample<br>(n = 63) |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Male                             | 100.0                       | 96.5                       | 95.2                         |
| Transgender Female or Non-Binary | 0.0                         | 3.5                        | 4.7                          |
| Black or African-American        | 21.4                        | 12.5                       | 34.9                         |
| Hispanic or Latino               | 32.2                        | 19.4                       | 15.9                         |
| White                            | 42.1                        | 48.3                       | 47.6                         |
| Other Race                       | 4.3                         | 4.2*                       | 1.6                          |
| Multiple Races                   | not collected               | 15.6                       | not collected                |
| Average Age                      | 40.8                        | 45.4                       | 47.3                         |

\*Other races include Asian (0.4%), Middle Eastern (0.2%), and Native American (3.6%)



# ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF SCF

## Backgrounds of Incarcerated People at SCF

Interviews with incarcerated people also reveal that they come from extremely difficult backgrounds. Many discuss how their childhoods or other life experiences led them into drug use and crime, and their challenges overcoming these backgrounds. They also discuss the negative impacts of incarceration on these issues. The environment in SCF is stressful and tense, and these tensions are exacerbated by the range of issues and treatment needs that incarcerated people present.

Survey data bear out the high level of hardship that incarcerated people have experienced. Abuse, neglect, and family mental illness, addiction, and gang involvement were common. One in four have spent time in the foster care and child welfare system, and one in three had a parent or close relative that was incarcerated. Overcoming these issues, and others, is extremely challenging in SCF.

---

I come from a poor family. I never had nothing, many nights where we was hungry, starving, no food, not in the sense of you just didn't have what you didn't like. There's literally no food.

How was that possible in America where a family is hungry? It shouldn't be.

*Gerald, Incarcerated<sup>1</sup>*

---

---

I was beat up. I was molested. I was assaulted. My father hated me because of me not being who he wanted me to be, that son fully that he wanted me to be ... I figured being into the gangs was the easiest way to beat up my father, and the men that were doing what they were doing to me, that was the easiest way to get back.

*Angel, Incarcerated*

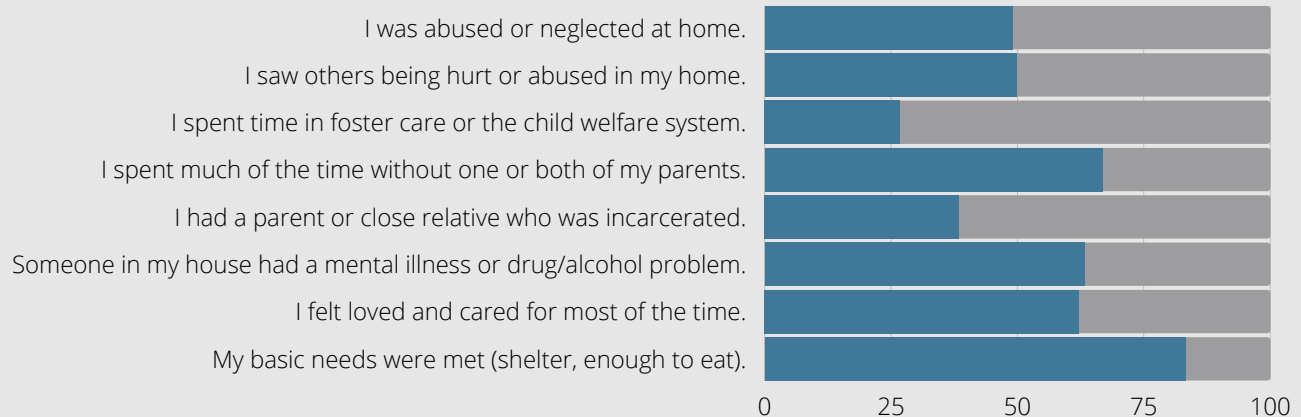
---

I think the biggest one is being in the system for so long. I spent over 20 of the 30 years I've been alive in the system. Foster care, group homes, juvie home, and now I got 10 years in prison. I think it gave me a lot of core values within myself, and yet, it also gave me those negative ones as well because it taught me how to do things, yet those things were always taught to be done in a negative manner.

*Antonio, Incarcerated*

---

## Adverse Childhood Experiences, as Reported by Incarcerated People at SCF



<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF SCF

## Who Are the People Who Work at SCF?

In January 2022, SCF employed 640 staff across the facility. Out of every 100 staff at SCF:

- 67 are security staff
- 10 work in the physical plant
- 6 are educators
- 5 are case managers
- 5 are medical or dental providers
- 4 are administrative support staff
- 2 are managers
- 1 is a mental health provider

### ***CDOC Records***

According to administrative data, corrections staff at SCF are approximately two-thirds male and one-third female. About three quarters of staff are classified as white. The average age of SCF staff members is 42.8; the youngest staff member is 21 while the oldest is 74.

### ***Survey Data***

Almost half (303, 47%) of corrections staff at SCF completed a research survey for this project in October 2020. Staff survey respondents exhibited high rates of refusal when asked about their gender and racial

identities. Roughly 30% of staff survey respondents declined to give their gender and/or racial or ethnic identity. In addition, 17% of staff survey respondents listed their gender as "non-binary/third gender," which does not match realities in the facility. These responses on demographic questions suggest hesitancy to share this information, or dislike of the questions asked. Therefore, our ability to accurately report on the demographics of the survey sample is limited.

### ***Interview Data***

59 staff members at SCF completed a research interview between March and May 2021. Participants were slightly more likely to be female and white than staff overall.

## Backgrounds of Corrections Staff at SCF

In interviews, corrections staff were to asked to share a little about their backgrounds. Many came to prison after being in the military or seeking a career in law enforcement, wishing to continue their public service. Others came from blue-collar jobs seeking better pay and benefits. Still others left or retired from professions such as teaching and nursing to work in prison. Many view the job as a way to serve the public at some level.

### Characteristics of Staff at SCF (% among those reporting)

|                           | CDOC Records<br>(N = 640) | Survey Sample<br>(N = 303) | Interview Sample<br>(N= 59) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Male                      | 65.6                      | 56.6                       | 59.3                        |
| Female                    | 34.4                      | 26.0                       | 40.7                        |
| Transgender or Non-Binary | 0.0                       | 17.3*                      | 0.0                         |
| Black or African-American | 6.9                       | 4.5                        | 3.7                         |
| Hispanic or Latino        | 11.7                      | 8.4                        | 9.3                         |
| White                     | 75.3                      | 78.2                       | 83.3                        |
| Other Race                | 6.2                       | 1.0**                      | 3.7                         |
| Multiple Races            | not collected             | 7.9                        | not collected               |
| Average Age               | 42.8                      | 43.3                       | 45.6                        |

\*As reported by staff via survey. See text above for descriptions of data limitations.

\*\*Other races include Middle Eastern (0.5%) and Native American (0.5%).

# ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF SCF

## Differences, and Common Ground

Comparisons of demographic data show that corrections staff at SCF are significantly more likely to be white than the people incarcerated there. While about three-quarters of staff are classified as white, only about 42% of incarcerated people are. There are substantially larger shares of Latino, Black, and incarcerated people of other races than there are staff. There are a similar range of ages across staff and incarcerated people (average ages of 43 and 41, respectively). Survey data also indicate that staff and incarcerated people have similar rates of prior military service; 18% of staff and 18% of incarcerated people have previously served in the military.

The data collected for this research also capture the ways that corrections staff and incarcerated people describe their personalities, personal histories, and hopes for the future. Interviews with staff and incarcerated people at SCF reveal that they share many of the same values. When looking at the ways that staff and incarcerated people describe themselves, there are many parallels—especially in terms of wanting to make positive contributions to their communities and help those around them. In interviews, many staff and incarcerated people indicate that they seek to help others, the facility, and their communities, often stemming from a sense of duty.

When asked about who they admire and why, both groups frequently identified family members that displayed loyalty, dependability, consistency, and support. Both groups also often cited world and religious figures that they thought had positive qualities such as leadership, wisdom, and a desire to help others. Some staff identified fellow staff members or supervisors that they thought displayed these qualities, and some incarcerated people named other incarcerated people that displayed them.

---

Describe myself? Thoughtful, empathetic. I care more about relationships than I do material things. I'm a father and, I like to think that I have a positive influence.

*Emilio, Incarcerated*

---

I'm very mild-mannered, I guess you could say. But in saying that, I do have a set of values that have been instilled through years being in the military... It's a sense of duty and integrity.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

I'm growing. I'm learning. I'm a learner. I love to learn, and I have a good heart even though I go against it sometimes in my past.

*Deshon, Incarcerated*

---

I guess I would describe myself as kind of passionate and understanding, and then also to the other side of that, I have been in corrections for [many] years so, you know, I'm not like *way* that way.

You have to have a little bit of edge I think.

*SCF Manager*

---





# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## What is the Purpose of Prison?

By survey, both staff and incarcerated people at SCF agree nearly unanimously that it is important for the prison to ensure public safety, as well as to prevent crimes and to help people make changes for a better life. Fewer staff and incarcerated people say that it is important for the prison to punish people for the crimes they have committed (see table below).

However, in-depth interviews with staff and incarcerated people reveal a pervasive crisis of purpose at SCF. Both groups point to the conflicting goals of safety, punishment, and support for positive change, as well as widespread lack of purpose among both staff and the incarcerated.

## Corrections Staff as Helping Professionals

By far, the largest category of responses indicated that staff view their purpose as positively influencing the lives of incarcerated people and helping to ensure their

*Our purpose is to get everybody out there in the streets and not have them come back.*

*Case Manager, Late Career*

success in the future. Many spoke of their desire to be positive role model for incarcerated people, or to help them make better decisions. This desire was expressed by many security staff, as well as educators, case managers, and librarians.

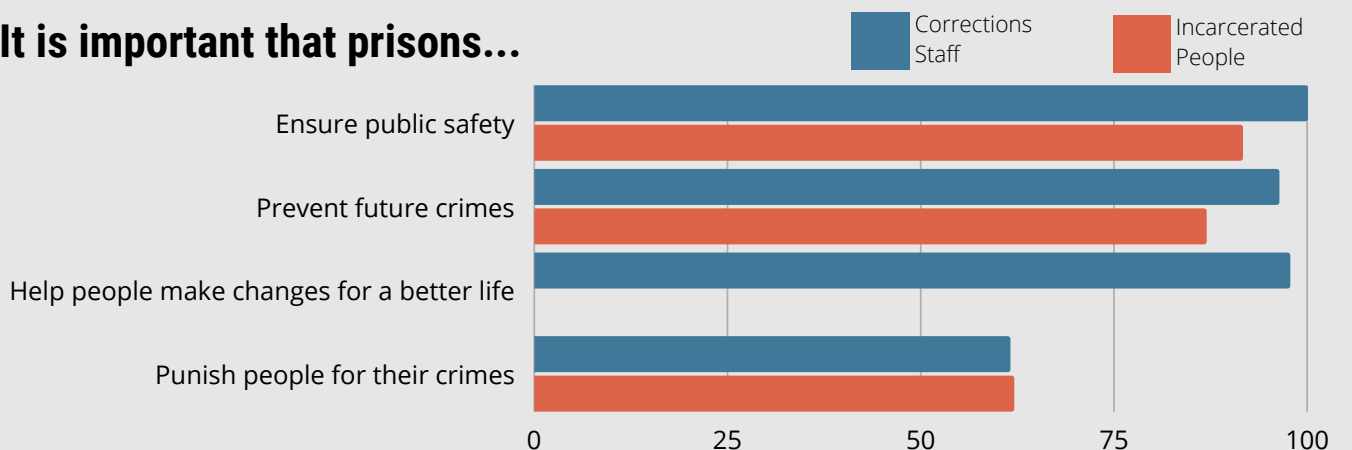
- **89% agreed that supporting the people incarcerated at SCF is part of their job.**
- **91% agreed that they enjoy helping incarcerated people work toward goals and targets.**
- **82% said they believe they positively influence the lives of incarcerated people through their work.**

*Every day I'm here, there's a chance to make an impact on somebody. There is a chance to help them make a better decision. There's a chance to help them succeed. And that's what drives me.*

*Educator, Early Career*

While these are positive accounts, it is worth noting that approximately one-tenth of SCF staff have a *non-helping* orientation (do not think supporting incarcerated people is part of their job). **In fact, 11% of staff indicated by survey that they do not believe rehabilitation is possible for the people incarcerated at SCF.**

## It is important that prisons...





# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## Role Conflict Among Corrections Staff

Role conflict was a persistent theme across interviews with staff and incarcerated people. Staff identified two main types of conflict in their roles:

### ***Conflict Between Security and Support Tasks***

The first type of conflict was primarily identified by educators, medical, and mental health support staff, who described ways in which the security functions of the prison interfere with their ability to provide services. For instance, certain security procedures – like restrictions on movement following a lock down, or modified operations enacted during a security staffing shortage – might prevent classes from being provided, eliminate library time, or interfere with the ability to keep medical appointments.

---

My purpose, the main purpose of this job, is to maintain a secure facility for the public's safety, the staff's safety, and the offenders' safety. The overall main purpose of anybody that works in corrections should be first and foremost the security [of the facility].

*Lieutenant, Late Career*

---

Because we are service-oriented, it is our duty to help them as much as we can. That sometimes comes in conflict with those who are guards because that is not what they're here for. They're here to maintain order and make sure that everything runs smoothly.

*Educator, Mid Career*

---

### ***Conflicts About Punishment and Accountability***

"To punish people for the crimes they have committed" was ranked by both staff and incarcerated as less important than the other aims of prison. In interviews, many corrections staff emphasized that "prison is the punishment," and that they did not feel it was their job to punish incarcerated people further. However, they largely do feel that it is their job to "hold offenders accountable." This was a commonly used phrase in staff interviews, though many expressed differing views on what it means to carry out this role.

In particular, many staff associated accountability with rules and procedures. Holding someone accountable would mean requiring them to follow the rules, while allowing them to break the rules without consequence would not be holding them accountable. **83% of SCF corrections staff surveyed agreed that "it is my job to hold incarcerated people accountable for breaking even minor rules."**

---

[My purpose is] in essence to be a role model, just be the oversight of the area to let these guys know that, "You're not just here to do whatever you want anytime you want because there is somebody watching. There is consequences. You do have to behave yourself."

*Officer, Late Career*

---

Staff often emphasized that maintaining boundaries and enforcing rules is necessary to fulfilling their core purpose of "keeping everyone safe" – not only fellow staff members, but also incarcerated people and the general public.

# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## Lack of Purpose Among Corrections Staff

Finally, a significant number of staff we interviewed described a lack of purpose in their work, or a perceived lack of purpose on the part of other staff.

- **57% believe that their work at SCF has a purpose.**
- **39% of staff say they feel motivated to go above and beyond what is asked of them in the job.**

While the most common reason for entering corrections indicated by staff was for pay, benefits, location, or convenience, some staff seemed able to grow into the role, while others retain a sense of apathy toward it. Others entered with a purpose, but have lost it over time.

---

I guess this has been my career. I think I've probably settled for it. I don't know that it's made me or ruined me. It's just been something that I've done.

*Officer, Late Career*

---

Interviews with corrections staff suggest that purpose may be undermined by a general lack of personal agency within the department and the facility. Many corrections staff feel like their opinions are not valued and that their thoughts do not matter. In addition, they express frustration with the lack of meaningful intervention from the department to address the things that are important to them.

However, for the nearly two-thirds of staff who do feel their work at SCF has purpose, interviews suggested high levels of frustration with colleagues who lack motivation or morale.

---

When I see that lack of purpose, it makes it hard to work alongside those individuals because they're missing it ...

You know, that'd be a good question I would like to ask my fellow coworkers just to see why they keep coming back every day, you know? And my immediate reaction of thinking is that they would say it's money, you know? They need the money, and the job is easy. But a lot of them do say, "Oh, man, I can't wait to leave this hellhole, blah-blah-blah." It's just like, "All right, if that's what you feel, why don't you just go?"

*Officer, Early Career*

---

What keeps you going every day is your coworkers that are on the same page as you and knowing you're helping somebody. I'm tired of lack of morale, lack of pride, people not caring.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

At the time, it was a good job and it seemed exciting and like I would be doing something that would benefit the world, I guess. But I think once you've been in prison your whole mentality changes from your original thought process of what you thought prison would be to what it actually is and how you actually feel about it once you're here. To be honest, it's honestly it's very difficult to be in this environment, to try to be a productive and positive person in this environment. It's very draining to try to toe the line and try to implement the things that the department says they want to implement but doesn't ever really seem to materialize. *Lieutenant, Mid Career*

# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## Purpose for Incarcerated People at SCF

Incarcerated people at SCF described their purpose in terms of three main tasks: helping others, helping themselves (by learning, growing, and changing), and making things right. “Making things right” includes things like taking responsibility for their actions and their impacts, taking steps to make amends with their families and their communities, and generally putting out good into the world as a balance to the bad.

## Finding Purpose in Prison

Incarcerated people that we interviewed spoke about things that offered purpose behind the walls, including building positive relationships, taking part in educational and program opportunities, having meaningful work (like being a mental health peer assistant or offender care aide), and having a chance to send money to their family or serve the community.

They also viewed these opportunities as more limited than they would wish. Many say that the prison offers them little chance to learn, to grow, to gain new skills, to support their families, to maintain meaningful relationships with their children and loved ones, or to give back to the community. Descriptions provided in interviews were supported by survey data:

- **37% of incarcerated respondents indicate that they feel they have a purpose at SCF.**
- **48% say they can participate in activities that promote their well-being and growth.**
- **17% say they have opportunities to make amends to the victims of their crimes.**
- **24% say they have opportunities to contribute positively to their community.**

[My purpose is] to become a greater man than what I was, and that still boils down to believing in myself. For the longest time, I didn't believe in myself. Now I have individuals that showed me that it was okay to believe in myself. It was okay to acknowledge my mistakes, to know that I've made a mistake but I am not a mistake. *Javier, Incarcerated*<sup>1</sup>

I think [my purpose is] to be a mentor. I think it's to be a mentor to anybody that's considering leaving a gang, anybody that's considering joining a gang, anybody that's considering picking up a pistol anytime, because that was my thing. I believe my purpose is to catch anybody that'll listen to me and that'll put the flag down or put the gun down. That's my community service. *Jermaine, Incarcerated*

My purpose here is to see what I did out there and how I affected people out there by burglarizing and stealing. You realize that no matter what you do in life, any crime, no matter what crime it is, you have a victim ... My purpose here is to learn from the situation, take as much classes as I can, as much information, good stuff, and put in here so that when I leave I'm a better person. Taking the responsibility for what I've done. *Walter, Incarcerated*

[My purpose is] trying to change lives, not just my own, but the people around me because I've caused so much chaos in the world and so much damage, and so much pain, and so much hurt. At what point in time do you feel like it's time to get back and try to leave something positive behind instead of all the chaos and destruction? *Dennis, Incarcerated*

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## "Two Different Itineraries"

While incarcerated people at SCF describe a strong sense of personal purpose in their lives – most often, to help others and to make amends for harms that they have caused in the past – they also express the feeling that there is little purpose to their time in prison. **Only 8% say that the prison does a good job of preparing them for release** – a core purpose of the prison as identified by the department, corrections staff, and incarcerated people.

**Instead, 72% of incarcerated people say they are often bored at SCF, and 57% say that they are “doing time” rather than using their time productively at SCF.** Like corrections staff, they describe frustration with limitations on their ability to build something of meaning.

I can't imagine how many people have no purpose in here. They don't do anything because number one, there's nothing to do and why do it?

*Ronnie, Incarcerated*

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted program opportunities in prisons across the country, Colorado included. Therefore, the last two years have been a

particularly difficult time for incarcerated people to find purpose in their daily lives. The reflections of incarcerated people at SCF on the purpose of their time in prison were often laced with grief and hopelessness.

It depends because my purpose and DOC's purpose, we have two different itineraries. They say Colorado Department of Corrections -- and there's no corrective anything. Honestly, excuse my expression, the DOC could give a shit. You have to take it upon yourself to either want to do better or not.

*Antonio, Incarcerated*

I can draw but there's nothing more disappointing than you draw something, you put it out on paper and somebody comes by and just crumples it up. I've tried to do signs about the size of paper with pithy sayings and somebody actually did that. It was this point [I realized] we're not really allowed to build anything of any significance in here. It's been really hard to find something that I can do that is satisfying.

*Matthew, Incarcerated*

I know I have to come to the realization that I could die in here basically. That's really about it. Other than that, you just have to deal with what it is. You have to accept it for what it is, deal with it on a daily basis and pursue things that potentially can help you reach that goal someday. I've been trying for almost 30 years and I haven't gotten very far. Some days are better than others, obviously. Something happens and it keeps that hope alive, and then there's other days where you just wish it was over. Basically, you just want it to end. *Caleb, Incarcerated*

# OUR PURPOSE AT SCF

## Conflicts of Purpose at SCF

There are distinct similarities in how corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF talk about their purpose in the context of the prison. While they overwhelmingly indicate a desire to contribute positively through their efforts, they also describe the prison as a place that limits or stifles their ability to fulfill their purpose.

They also acknowledge limitations in the prison's current ability to fulfill its purpose, including adequately preparing incarcerated people for re-entry as a means of improving public safety and preventing future crime.

- **42% of corrections staff say SCF does a good job of preparing people for release**
- **8% of incarcerated people say SCF does a good job of preparing people for release.**

## Findings Related to the Purpose of Prison, Incarcerated People, and Corrections Staff

- Corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF have high levels of agreement about the purpose of prison: to ensure public safety, prevent crime, and help people make changes for a better life.
- More than 80% of corrections staff at SCF indicate a helping orientation toward their work, saying that they see it as part of their job to assist incarcerated people in reaching their goals, and that they enjoy doing so. Approximately one-tenth of corrections staff at SCF say they do not enjoy helping incarcerated people and do not believe rehabilitation is possible for the people incarcerated in the prison.
- Corrections staff at SCF demonstrate *role conflict*, including conflicts between security functions and service functions, as well as conflicts about the role of punishment in the prison. Developing consensus about how to manage role conflicts may be an important task.
- Incarcerated people at SCF describe high levels of *personal purpose*, including helping others, helping themselves, and making amends.
- Incarcerated people at SCF say they have few opportunities to grow, to serve their community, or to make amends while at SCF, and indicate that their time in prison is not productive. Only 37% indicate that they have a purpose at SCF.
- Many corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF lack purpose or have experienced a loss of purpose, leading to low morale, lack of motivation, and hopelessness in their lives and work.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Align policies, practices, and staff with SCF's desired purpose.
- Develop consensus about how to manage role conflicts between security and service.
- Increase opportunities for incarcerated people to help themselves, help others, and make amends.
- Offer chances for correctional staff and incarcerated people to build and create.

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## The Prison Environment for Incarcerated People

For incarcerated people, the prison environment is characterized by deprivation, isolation, and dehumanization. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences are, to some extent, “built in” to the experience of living in prison. However, our research suggests that these experiences can be made worse or better by negative or positive interactions with staff, and can be addressed through prison policies and practices.

### Deprivation in Prison

In the prison environment, including at SCF, incarcerated people are deprived of many physical and psychological needs and comforts, such as nourishing food, comfortable sleep, personal space, privacy, and access to the natural world. Human behavioral research suggests that it is more difficult for humans to focus on higher-order tasks – like achieving goals – when their basic human needs are not met; therefore, closely considering the basic needs and reasonable human comforts of incarcerated people may be important to improving overall wellbeing and facility outcomes.

### Incarcerated People Say They Lack a Healthy, Nourishing Diet.

One of the most consistent themes of our interviews with incarcerated people about their needs was food. The food at SCF is described as not enough, non-nutritive, ill-prepared, unappetizing, and unclear. Via survey,

- 3 out of 5 say they do not get enough to eat.
- 4 out of 5 say they are not able to have a balanced diet.
- 3 out of 4 say their food is not sanitary.

Incarcerated people we interviewed expressed frustration with a high carb diet low on fresh fruits and vegetables, and described what they believe to be the visible negative impacts of this on their health and the health of their peers.

---

The food is – it’s scary, you don’t want to eat. I want to eat well and take care of myself. The diet is a really high carb diet, and canteen is the only place to find a little better food. I really, really would have a better diet, but it is what it is in prison. Yes. You get what you get.

*Gary, Incarcerated<sup>1</sup>*

---

I shouldn’t say we never get fresh vegetables. They’re always canned and they’re always over cooked. Usually, they’re mush. We have during season – like recently we were getting some fresh cantaloupe and muskmelon and watermelon, that only lasted for like two weeks, something like that. That was nice.

*Rodney, Incarcerated*

---

Those we spoke with described attempts to balance or improve their diet by purchasing items from the prison canteen, such as packaged cooked chicken or tuna, oatmeal, and protein bars. However, they also described varying levels of ability to purchase these items.

---

I have the good fortune that I eat oatmeal, nuts, fish, every day to supplement because you just can’t survive on the chow hall. There’s guys here that have to survive on that chow hall food. In the long run, diabetes goes up, heart disease goes up, blood pressure goes up.

*Eric, Incarcerated*

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Incarcerated People Say They Cannot Afford Supplies or Basic Human Comforts.

On average, incarcerated people earn less than \$20 per month from their job assignments at SCF. With this, they must purchase any supplementary food they need, over the counter medication, and many of their own hygiene items. While SCF management reports providing incarcerated people with toilet paper and soap for free, only **11% reported they receive all that they need for good personal hygiene without purchasing it themselves.** This includes toothbrushes and toothpaste.

With the money remaining, they must often choose between paying for phone calls, purchasing stamps, paper, and envelopes for correspondence, and purchasing items for their comfort, such as personal clothing items or supplies for hobbies (like markers or yarn). Upon intake, incarcerated people receive a basic state issued wardrobe, but must purchase special items like sweatpants or gym shorts, and may have to replace items that become lost or damaged at their own cost. **About half of incarcerated people at SCF say the canteen carries the items that they need, but less than a third say those items are fairly priced.**

---

Money buys comfort. Just on average, you're making \$15 a month and you've got to decide, "Do I want to enjoy a cake or snack once in a while or have a soup?" Even \$30 a month would be huge. You wouldn't be choosing between soap and food or even just - a lot of people can't even afford Tylenol. What do you do if you have a headache in here? Hopefully, you know somebody that has it where you can ask.

*George, Incarcerated*

---

A recurring theme in interviews with incarcerated people is inequity. Those who have family or other support systems are able to live more comfortably inside. **42% of survey respondents indicated that they receive no money at all from their families.** For those that do, the average amount that they report having put on their books by family each month is \$83, though some receive much more. In addition, incarcerated people at SCF can earn additional privileges and comforts through involvement in programs or through promotion to an incentive unit.

---

I'm lucky that I have family. I have some friends out there that still look out for me, so I'm well off, but there's other people in here that struggle on just day-to-day things. Even in here, there's poor folks and rich folks.

*Jorge, Incarcerated*

---

Some interviewees spoke about the impact of physical and financial deprivations on the prison environment, suggesting that deprivation leads to illegal and dangerous activities inside the prison.

---

They're not making a way to where you can take care of yourself, be independent, and actually make a living to provide for yourself. That'd be the reason why the violence and the drug abuse, the heavy influx of narcotics. Here, you've got guys that, that's how they made a living in the free world, was through illicit [activity]. If I can't provide for myself and meet my needs by working in the kitchen or working in laundry, I resort back to the same choices that bring me to the penitentiary.

*Gerald, Incarcerated*

---

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Incarcerated People Say They Are Sleep Deprived.

Another area of deprivation for incarcerated people at SCF is sleep. **Less than half of people (44%) surveyed indicated that they are usually able to get a good night's sleep.** Sleep deprivation (less than 7-9 hours per night for adults) is associated with heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, obesity, anxiety, depression, and other health and mental health disorders. Incarcerated people that we interviewed described sleep interruptions ranging from noise and light disturbances that happen during evening counts, sharing close quarters with a cellmate, and thin mattresses and blankets.

---

I don't sleep very good I think, because the hyper-awareness of your situation. I'm hyper aware of things. If I hear a noise I'm up.

*Norman, Incarcerated*

---

## Incarcerated People Say They Generally Do Get Enough Activity and Exercise.

On the other hand, **most incarcerated people at SCF (77%) do generally report having enough time for recreation**, and the ability to get fresh air and exercise. In 2020, SCF implemented a new "open movement" policy, allowing greater freedom for incarcerated people in the minimum security levels to access the yard and to choose when to visit chow within the available hours. A visit to the yard is often characterized by substantial movement and activity, ranging from independent exercise, coached workouts as part of the SCF's Redemption Road Crossfit program, dog training, and gardening.

The exception to this is for those incarcerated in SCF's Management Control Comprehensive (MCC) unit, who have more limited access to movement and the outdoors. Those in MCC have four hours out of cell per day, including recreation in a confined space, education, and showers.

There's so many people in here that have hip problems, knee problems, all kinds of physical problems that derive from just not being able to sleep on a normal mattress because all we get is this little – there's a three-inch mattress that, after a month, it's like paper. It fixes every part of your day. I couldn't get no sleep, so now I'm in a bad mood when I wake up. I'm in a bad mood, he's in a bad mood. Now me him and him get in a fight. Now there's tension in the unit and now there's arguing between staff and inmates, it affects everything, every single day in prison. Just sleep, just being able to sleep. If you really want to help people in prison, it may seem - and I get it, it is a small thing because I want my freedom first. I want programming better, comprehensive programming, I want activities to keep my mind engaged. The last thing on that list is going to be a comfortable mattress or whatever but it is so important. Sleep and healthy food. *Emilio, Incarcerated*



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Incarcerated People Say They Lack Privacy and Comfortable Spaces.

Spaces inhabited by incarcerated people at SCF frequently have concrete floors, metal doors, and colorless walls. However, units at SCF are vastly different on the “low side” (minimum security), the “high side” (medium security), and in the Management Controlled Custody unit (restricted housing). Depending on the unit and its security level, the furnishings may consist of stackable chairs and folding tables, or heavy metal tables and chairs that are bolted to the ground. The hallways in the programs building, many of the classrooms, and the inventive units on the high side have colorful murals, and some spaces have house plants and fish tanks.

Units on the high side are cavernous and multi-leveled with a central security hub, while units on the low side more closely resemble a dormitory, and have greater access to natural light and outdoor common areas. On the whole, common areas are crowded and noisy with the sounds of echoing voices, metal doors, and difficult-to-understand loudspeakers. Cells are small, mostly double-occupied, have little natural light, and have hall-facing windows which cannot be covered.

When surveyed about their living environment, incarcerated people indicated mixed views on the cleanliness and comfort of their units.

- **58% do not find their unit clean.**
- **54% find their unit “uncomfortable.”**
- **71% find that they are not able to have privacy when they need it.**

Residents on the low side of the facility are more likely to find their unit clean, but in general, there is little difference between the responses of residents on both sides. Those survey respondents living in MCC report the lowest rates of cleanliness, comfort, and privacy.

---

This is a place where you're never really alone. Even when you're in the shower, there's usually a guy in the shower next to you, and there's a guy outside waiting in line. You never have that alone time. When you go to the hall, you're in a cell by yourself, but there's a guy banging on the wall next to you and there's a guy singing, and there's guys talking, so there's never a chance to just be quiet by yourself.

*Jake, Incarcerated*

---

“About two weeks into that pandemic, after the lockdown of New York specifically, I started seeing a lot of reports on people's mental health. There's a lot of talk about mental health. “Oh, my anxiety has gone up. I can't go out and socialize with my friends.” You know what? Try being locked in an 8 by 10 cell with another dude, where you have to [defecate] in front of him. He might cover up but let me tell you, it drives up your anxiety. Right now, that's my life... It's really harmful to be locked in these small cells. I don't think it's good for the human mind or the human spirit.

*Thomas, Incarcerated*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Incarcerated People Miss Experiencing the Natural World

Interviews with incarcerated people indicated that they feel a disconnection from the natural environment, and that having contact with the outdoors – sun, snow, rain, or the night sky, for instance – is a source of happiness and wellbeing for them. Those with greater access to the outdoors tended to find this beneficial.

---

I'll tell you something weird that happened like two nights ago, I woke up and I looked out my window, which I don't normally do, but it just happened to be that I opened my eyes, I saw the moon. There's a tiny space that I could - it was really cool. I miss it. I hope that I could see it again sometime, that maybe it would be in that position again sometime when I woke up.

*Thomas, Incarcerated*

---

They have something amazing here [in my unit], which is a backyard patio that we can access at any time. I can go outside at 11:30 at night and look up at the sky and just relax and clear my mind. That has helped the mental health aspect of it a lot.

*Jake, Incarcerated*

---

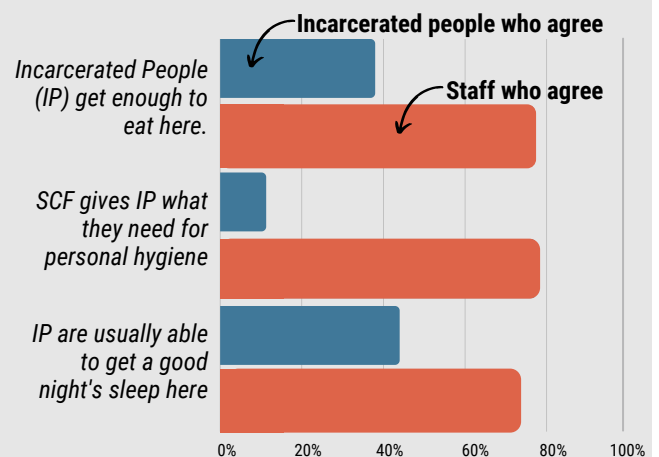
[If I could change one thing] it's the walls. I would make them either fences that you could see through or I would make them see through, clear, because I just - it's painful sometimes to not be able to look out and see the horizon or anything.

*Caleb, Incarcerated*

---

## SCF Staff on Conditions for Incarcerated People

Nearly all staff at SCF (94%) say that it is the prison's job to ensure that the people incarcerated at SCF are protected from cruel and inhumane living conditions. However, when asked about conditions at SCF for incarcerated people, corrections staff largely believed that they get enough to eat, that they receive what they need for good personal hygiene, and that they are able to get a good night's sleep. This is in stark contrast to the reports of incarcerated people.



In addition, SCF staff express varying opinions on what is a right, a need, or a privilege for incarcerated people. Further, they disagree on which comforts incarcerated people should have access to, and whether they should have to earn human comforts through good behavior. Among the most controversial offerings at SCF is the ability for incarcerated people in certain incentivized units to be able to purchase or make use of large screen televisions and video game consoles.

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## *Isolation in Prison*

Incarcerated people are, in essence, sentenced to limited contact with their loved ones and social support systems. Family visits are short, constrained, and may require significant travel by family members. Between January and March of 2020, only 19% of SCF's incarcerated population received a visit from family. In person visits were suspended due to the spread of COVID-19 in March of 2020, after which no visits occurred until May 2021. Prior to COVID-19, SCF had quarterly family events, where attendees could share food and games with their families in a less restrictive setting. These were meaningful to those who were able to attend.

The DOC is so incredibly restrictive when it comes to family interactions. I think that has a very negative effect on people. It's not conducive to maintaining intimate relations with our family... to have that bond, to have those opportunities to really connect because a three to four or five-hour visit once every six months, that just doesn't cut it, especially with children.

*Patrick, Incarcerated*

I'm a parent myself, so I can empathize. I cannot imagine living here 24 hours a day. I cannot absolutely not imagine having a loved one that lives here 24 hours a day. When you're trying to get information, and I know it hasn't been starker than with the pandemic, when they can't visit. They can't touch a loved one.

*SCF Manager*

Even personal interactions within the prison are limited and controlled. Many of the people we spoke with reported going months, years, or decades without receiving a hug or a supportive physical touch. Further, incarcerated men have few interactions with women at all. In interviews, men who had been incarcerated for a long time commented on feeling nervous talking to a female interviewer who was not a correctional officer. Sociological research consistently demonstrates that humans are social creatures, and that relationships – positive and negative – are a powerful force in our well-being, mental health, and success. Therefore, it is not surprising that isolation has negative impacts on incarcerated people.

What's harmful to me? Right now, you're feeling it. I'm sure you can sense my anxiety. I'm starved for contact with normal people. I'm starved. Every time I talk to somebody who's mental health or a case manager or even my friends on the phone, I'm so pent up. I'm starved for what I call normal human interaction, which has nothing to do with violence or gangs or whatever.

*Thomas, Incarcerated*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Dehumanization in Prison

Finally, there are aspects of incarceration that diminish humanity, such as numbering, counting, and de-personalizing people through the strict application of policies and procedures. Things that contribute to dehumanization at SCF include referring to incarcerated people as “offender” or by a number instead of by their name, confiscating personal belongings that do not present a safety risk, and in general, not listening to or treating incarcerated people as if they matter.

Things incarcerated people noted as “humanizing” at SCF include small graces like allowing flexibility in uniform and allowing them to have and display personal photos, as well as bigger themes, like speaking to them and listening to them with respect. **When surveyed, 46% of incarcerated people at SCF indicated that, on the whole, staff at SCF treat them with respect.** They were more likely to express positive interactions and relationships with those staff located in their unit, that they spoke to the most and knew the best.

---

Once you take away most of the things that we have – our life, a phone, a laptop, all of our clothes – we have to cling to something. It's a big thing to find your identity with what you're wearing. [The dress code changes] go a long way because a lot of these guys would be like, "I'm just a sheep, everyone's wearing green." I appreciate them not making us wear the greens like they did all the time.

*Justin, Incarcerated*

---

---

What do I know that I need that I haven't been able to get? Right now, I need respect. I need people to care what I think and what I believe. I need people to understand that I am a person. I'm not a felon. I'm a person. I'm not my crime. I committed my crime. I need to see that change and it's not here.

*Bill, Incarcerated*

---

## Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff: You're Just a Number

Paradoxically, both incarcerated people and staff expressed similar sentiments in interviews about their experiences of dehumanization in the department of corrections.

You're warehoused. You've got a name, you have a number, you're in a bunk, you're in a room and they do counts. They inventory you. It feels like you're just a product on a shelf.

*Walter, Incarcerated*

I'm on a 25 year sentence to life until I can retire. So, why not make the best of the day? But the state you're truly just a number. You're a body.

*-Officer, Early Career*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Safety and Violence in Prison

The threat of violence is unfortunately a reality of the prison experience for both incarcerated people and corrections staff. **45% of incarcerated people and 59% of corrections staff at SCF say they sometimes feel their life is in danger while at SCF.**

Via survey, incarcerated people indicated a variety of things that make them feel threatened including other incarcerated people, corrections staff, and gangs. In short, the threat of violence – including physical violence, verbal abuse, and bullying – comes from a number of sources.

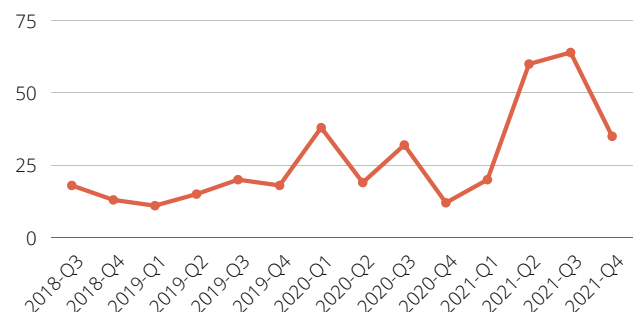
In addition, survey data suggest that fear is based on regular experiences of physical and verbal violence in the prison. Via survey, 23% of incarcerated respondents say a correctional officer has used physical force on them in the past month, and 29% of incarcerated people say a peer has physically assaulted them in the past month. Far more report that they have been yelled at or threatened during that period of time.

Corrections staff also report a sense of danger while at work. By survey, 20% of staff respondents say they have

been physically assaulted by an incarcerated person at SCF in the past month, and 83% say they have been yelled at, threatened, or insulted during that time.

Facility administrative data indicate far fewer staff assaults and uses of force, suggesting differences in how those who experience violence may define "assault" or "force," or discrepancies in what is reportable. However, in interviews, many staff argue that assaults are rising at SCF. Facility administrative data do support this point, as the number officially reported assaults against staff spiked in the spring and summer of 2021, when interviews were being conducted for this project.

**Number of Staff Assaults at SCF by Quarter, 2018-2021**



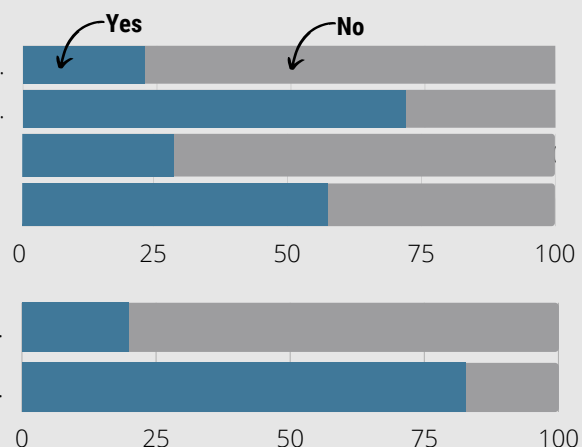
## Frequency of Experiencing Violence at SCF, as Reported by Survey:

### Incarcerated People Report that in the Past Month

- 23% have had a CO use physical force on them.
- 71% have had a CO raise their voice at them.
- 29% have been physically assaulted by another IP.
- 58% have been yelled at or threatened by another IP.

### Corrections Staff Report that in the Past Month

- 20% have been physically assaulted by an IP.
- 83% have been yelled at, threatened, or insulted by an IP.



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

The comparison of data across sources suggests that relatively few violent events initiated by relatively few individuals, experienced in a closed environment, contribute to a pervasive sense of fear. For instance, only 4% of incarcerated survey respondents indicated they had assaulted an officer in the past month, and only 25% said they had yelled at or threatened an officer during that time. Frequent raised voices, verbal abuse, and threatening words contribute significantly to the feeling of danger at SCF.

## **Staff Use of Force**

In contrast, a relatively high number of staff respondents indicated that they have used physical force on an incarcerated person (37%) or raised their voice on an incarcerated person (66%) in the past month. While it is unclear how staff define "force" or raising voices, further examination of the effectiveness of these tools for ensuring safety versus creating fear would be valuable. Only 24% of incarcerated people say that the staff make them feel safe, and 44% say that they feel threatened by some staff members at SCF.

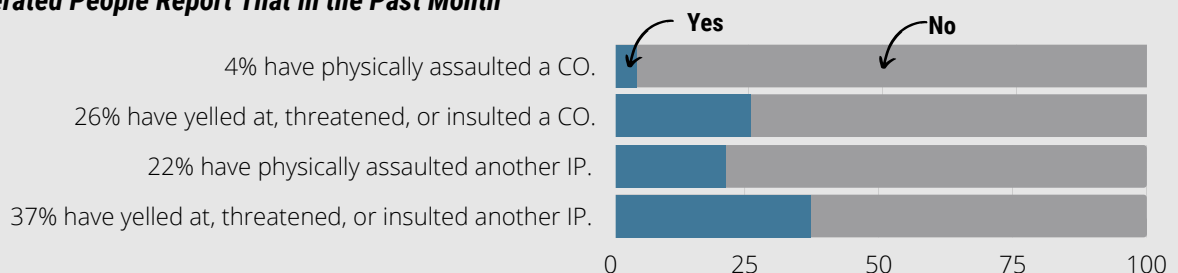
## **Racial Violence and Bullying**

Half of those incarcerated at SCF (50%) say that racial tension between incarcerated people is a problem. In addition, those with marginalized identities – including transgender people, gay people, and people with sex offenses – are more likely to experience violence and victimization. By survey, incarcerated respondents who identified as transwomen or non-binary people were significantly more likely to report they felt threatened by other incarcerated people.

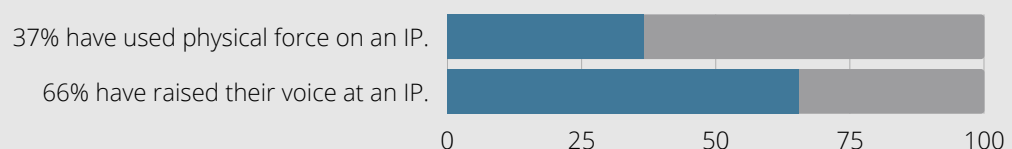
A substantial majority (72%) of incarcerated people surveyed agreed that the weak are exploited and victimized in the prison. Those that we interviewed from these categories indicated that they are not accepted, that they struggle to plug in, and often isolate themselves to avoid being hurt or abused by other incarcerated people. It is clear both interview and survey data that they do not feel there is adequate recourse for them to pursue in order to find safety at SCF.

## **Frequency of Inflicting Violence at SCF, as Reported by Survey:**

### ***Incarcerated People Report That in the Past Month***



### ***Corrections Staff Report That in the Past Month***



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Gang Violence

In interviews, some who had been incarcerated for a longer time indicated that gang violence and the “political” nature of the prison has improved at SCF compared to 5 or 10 years ago. However, survey data suggests that gang violence and intimidation remain a serious threat to the safety of incarcerated people, with 53% of incarcerated respondents saying that gangs make them feel unsafe at SCF.

The other thing is gang violence. That's a terrible day because you just never know what's going to happen to anybody. It could happen to staff, it could happen to random people. It's just terrible. That's what I'd say is a pretty bad day.

*Frank, Incarcerated*

## Trauma in Prison

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration defines trauma as resulting from “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” In short, trauma occurs when we fear for our lives or our safety, or when we witness death or threat of death. Research at SCF reveals that trauma in the prison environment is

common, and that it has negative impacts on the safety and wellbeing of incarcerated people and corrections staff. Almost two-thirds of both incarcerated people (64%) and corrections staff (60%) say they have seen upsetting things that they “just can't shake” while incarcerated or working in the prison.

## Something That is Still in My Head

Most interview participants – both incarcerated people and staff – spoke about witnessing, experiencing, or hearing about violence in the prison. Participants recalled specific instances of violence between people who are incarcerated, and between staff and people who are incarcerated. Others – both incarcerated people and staff – spoke about watching people suffer and die during the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes in the hospital and sometimes on the cell block.

I'll always remember the screams that I've heard with people getting killed or stabbed and beat up. There's people that I've seen getting jumped and I've seen their face, their skin from their face from here, flat all the way down to here. Having that is nerve-wracking, because I don't want anything like that ever to happen to me or anybody that I care about.

*Julio, Incarcerated*

Well, that last [staff assault] four years ago coming down here and the guy is beating that lady's head into the wall. That's something that is still in my head. I have seen people chasing each other around the pods with knives. I've seen people trying to throw boiling hot Vaseline on other people. I've seen dead people, you know, when they take them out when they've died of natural causes or whatnot. I've seen the cells in this place where, I mean, you have a stabbing, there's blood all over the wall. I don't know what really to tell you on it. *Case Manager, Late Career*



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Effects of Trauma

Trauma has well documented effects, including intrusive memories of the event, distressing reactions to something that reminds you of it, avoidance of thinking or talking about it, negative changes in thinking and mood (such as feeling numb, hopeless, or disinterested), changes in physical and emotional reactions (such as being easily frightened, hypervigilant, or feeling overwhelming anger, shame, guilt or blame). Emerging research shows that long-term exposure to trauma changes the brain, and may affect our ability to form memories and make decisions.

In interviews, both incarcerated people and staff clearly describe trauma symptoms, such as desensitization, hypervigilance, and rumination.

---

When I came to prison at 21 years old, I learned violence and I found myself in a bad space not too long ago where I'm watching a guy get his face stomped into the chow hall floor and I'm trying to eat my spaghetti faster so the pepper spray doesn't hit me before I'm done eating. I'm cold about it. My blood pressure isn't even up. I'm thinking, I should've put it in a canteen order.

*Lance, Incarcerated*

But you're on your tiptoes all day wondering what might happen. It just keeps you in that – I wouldn't call it a fight or flight mode – but you constantly have to think what's safe? How are you gonna handle it? What if you're escorting with two officers and this happens? Because you're constantly role playing in your mind what could happen.

*Officer, Early Career*

And so, I got body duty, which means I sit with the body and just take notes on who enters in and everything, which sounds more aggressive than it really is. I mean, it's bad, but apparently, I'm desensitized to that.

*Educator, Mid Career*

Psychologically, there's things that you do, that you learn to do, like being on the high side, turn your back to the wall of a crowded room, but that's self-defense that saved your life.

*Dennis, Incarcerated*

When I saw my first significant incident, it was my sixth month in, I had two kids at home, my wife was pregnant. I remember going home and laying by her, and then I couldn't get the noise out of my head. I couldn't get the noise out of my ears. And then, I just was like when I wake up, I'm gonna tell her I'm gonna quit. I'm gonna quit. When I wake up, I'm done. And then, I woke up, and I just pushed it down, and then I went to work, and we used dark humor. We used dark humor, and the next time it wasn't so bad, and the next time it wasn't bad, and then it wasn't bad at all. *SCF Manager*



# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Getting Help at SCF

Healthy personal coping mechanisms and external supports can help protect people from the effects of trauma or help them heal. 55% of incarcerated people and 69% of staff say they have healthy ways to cope with the stress of living or working (respectively) in prison.

**This leaves nearly half of incarcerated people and nearly one-third of staff who say they lack coping mechanisms or rely on negative coping mechanisms to deal with stress and trauma.**

Further, data do not suggest that people at SCF have access to much external support for experiences with violence and victimization. In particular, interview participants say that there are inadequate responses from staff and from the prison when things go wrong. Only 17% of incarcerated people surveyed indicated that they believe victims of bullying are able to get the help they need at SCF. In general, only 28% of incarcerated people say they feel safe raising concerns with staff at SCF.

91% of incarcerated survey respondents say that the grievance process at SCF is not a useful tool to address their concerns. In interviews, they describe the grievance process and investigation hearings at SCF as unfair, opaque, and unlikely to result in a just outcome. In particular, they are frustrated by lack of transparency.

---

[You fill out a grievance] and a couple of months later, they call you down there to the office. You're confronted by three or four captains or hierarchy of the people.

Then usually you get intimidated and drop the whole thing. At least that's what happens to me. You have no representation. You're caught off guard.

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

---

## Support for Corrections Staff

Similarly, corrections staff indicated that support from the department in response to the stress of the job is often lacking. There is high awareness of the department's Employee Assistance Program, but low uptake due to stigma or fear of information shared being disclosed with other staff.

Only 16% of staff say that they feel SCF's policies and practices support staff wellbeing, and only 16% of staff feel SCF leadership does everything possible to keep staff safe. However, some staff reported that in recent years, trauma response has improved, including increased contact from departmental crisis response teams, as well as personal support from management.

As for the offender deaths recently, I had a lieutenant, the captain, and the warden call me on my personal cell phone, ask me how I was doing, how I was feeling. The warden mandated I take the next day off and see how I was doing and let him know if I needed more time. It was actually very helpful. I was actually super impressed. It's just that we work in the largest prison. We have so many employees, so many offenders. To have the warden reach out to me [meant a lot]. *Officer, Early Career*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## The Impact of Prison on Incarcerated People

A range of social and criminological research has demonstrated the negative impacts of incarceration on human beings. It is beyond the scope of this report to fully explore the risks and benefits of incarceration. However, given that incarceration is currently a primary tool in the state of Colorado to respond to crime, this report identifies what people at SCF experience as the impact of their incarceration, with consideration of factors that may lessen the negative impacts of living in a prison.

Incarcerated people at SCF describe a range of ways that being incarcerated has impacted them and their families. Most of those we spoke with described a predominantly negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. They also described feeling that prison had changed them for the worse - deteriorating their social skills, making them more aggressive or manipulative, teaching them "criminal skills," and generally eroding their ability to relate to others or function in normal life.

I think as a whole, it's a negative impact. To me, I look at everything as opportunity to learn from it, and I'm trying to think from that every moment has a purpose and it's my job to find out what it is. But as a whole, the communication, the resources – the lack of is so vast that it very negatively affects me. The people, the environment, the communication, the close quarters, the quality of food. All of it negatively affects my mental health for sure. *Hunter, Incarcerated*

I'm still handicapped by the system because I'm institutionalized. It's hard for me to go anywhere. Even now when I'm in the incentive [unit] and I have free movement, I still go and ask if it's okay for me to go outside. Everybody's just walking in and out. Even during our program time, we have a programs' building with a restroom, we have free movement and the same thing, I still have to ask if it's okay if I can go to use the restroom. "Is it okay if I can go outside? Is it okay if I can get this? May I get this?" *Antonio, Incarcerated*

You become hyper-aware of situations and when things are going wrong and you develop an anxiety for these things. It brings out this fight or flight thing in you but there's really no flight in here. You don't have that option because it doesn't matter where you go, you can still be caught. [So] you fight. It brings out this anger in you because then you have to reach down into a spot of you that is not healthy and bring this person out of you to handle this situation. Like when I got out it made me ... I was mean, I was aggressive. I perceived situations with people wrong. It led to a lot of fights out there. You learn to not play games in here so I'm not playing with you at a party or something. You're going to just talk to me like that? The world is a lot different. It's that type of delusion that you take on from prison – that you get out and it's like that out there, and it's not. *Norman, Incarcerated*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Prison Saved My Life

A number of incarcerated people described positive impacts of their time in prison, including self-reflection, broadened perspective, more gratitude for what they have, and awakened spiritual benefits. Several of those we spoke with directly stated that going to prison had “saved their life” by stopping them from causing additional harm or removing them from a dangerous situation. However, they also described diminishing returns on being in prison and a wish that it could be something more positive to support their growth.

---

Until you have an environment in prison that allows each person to be themselves and to better who they are, prison is just torture. The longer you keep a person in prison, the more you're harming them, you're not helping them. Because once you get past a certain point, there is no more benefit.

*Emilio, Incarcerated*

---

## "Whether You're in Blue or Green": The Impact of Prison on Corrections Staff

Corrections staff at SCF also expressed that working in prison is stressful and traumatic due to the nature of the prison environment. Not surprisingly, the struggles and traumas experienced are different for incarcerated people and for corrections staff. However, as one staff member said, “whether you’re in blue or you’re in green, you’re a victim of this institution.” Both groups are negatively impacted by the culture and the physical environment of the prison, as well as the threat of violence and abuse.

I've seen everything that I think you can in prison life. I've seen people be sexually abused. I was a first responder to a murder that happened. Even though that person may or may not have been a good person and they did bad things and had some victims themselves, I still always hold the fact that person died in my arms. That doesn't go away. So, you carry those emotions with you. I've seen staff be brutally assaulted too. I've seen a staff be beat with a broomstick and not be able to do anything because I was in a tower and all I could do was watch and use my radio to get other people to help. Those are hard things too. And also just there's like the day-to-day things - the things that are fringe things, like visiting and legal things that you see that happen that give you a full picture of the burden on offenders' families and the things that they go through with that... and those things are very sad. It's a sad environment. *Lieutenant, Mid Career*

# THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT

## Findings Related to the Prison Environment, Human Needs, and Safety

- Incarcerated people at SCF endorse common experiences in the prison environment: deprivation, isolation, dehumanization, and violence. Corrections staff estimate these experiences as far fewer and less severe than incarcerated people do.
- In particular, experiences of deprivation include reduced access to nutritious food, hygiene supplies and other basics, sleep, privacy, comfort, and the natural environment. Incarcerated people at SCF report high levels of deprivation, as well as appreciation for some recent improvements, including a relaxed dress code and increased access to the outdoors.
- Both incarcerated people and corrections staff report feeling unsafe while living and working at SCF. Both groups report experiencing physical violence, and more frequently, verbal threats and abuse.
- Incarcerated people report feeling threatened sometimes by other incarcerated people, sometimes by corrections staff, and sometimes specifically by gang violence in the prison. In addition, they report that racial tension is a problem.
- Victimization and bullying of incarcerated people from marginalized groups is common. Transwomen and non-binary people report feeling less safe, particularly with other incarcerated people.
- Both incarcerated people and corrections staff describe traumatic experiences and show symptoms of trauma, including hyper-vigilance, desensitization, and rumination (reliving traumatic events).
- Many incarcerated people and correctional staff do not feel they get the support they need to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Most incarcerated people do not feel safe raising concerns with staff, and almost none find the grievance process useful.
- Incarcerated people are negatively impacted by the prison environment, describing the onset of mental health problems, social anxieties, institutionalization, and criminalization. Corrections staff also describe negative impacts of the environment on their wellbeing, including stress, sadness, and hyper-vigilance.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Examine conditions and consider how improvements can be made to food, sleep, and other basic needs.
- Expand ways for incarcerated people to have positive social interactions both inside and across the walls.
- Adopt humanizing language and practices when engaging with incarcerated people and corrections staff.
- Explore best practices and innovative techniques to reduce violence and improve conflict resolution.
- Create meaningful support structures for both incarcerated people and corrections staff to respond to trauma and other harmful impacts of living and working in the institution.

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Job Satisfaction and Stress

Data from surveys and interviews suggests that job satisfaction among corrections staff at SCF is low, while job stress and frustration is high.

- **71% of staff survey respondents say their level of work-related stress is high or very high.**
- **78% feel that this job affects their mental health.**
- **32% say that they drink or use substances more than they would like because of this job.**
- **35.5% say they look forward to coming to work.**

In interviews, many participants described some form of health impact that resulted from, or was exacerbated by, their job. Physical, mental, and emotional health problems were mentioned by a significant number of participants—often consisting of all three.

As far as me doing my job I will do it 100%, but like I lose hours of sleep, weeks of sleep and it affects me mentally, physically, and emotionally on a regular basis.

*Lieutenant, Late Career*

Participants identified many factors leading to job stress, including relationships with management and other staff members, frustrating institutional structures, and the dangers of working in the prison environment.

## Pride in the Job

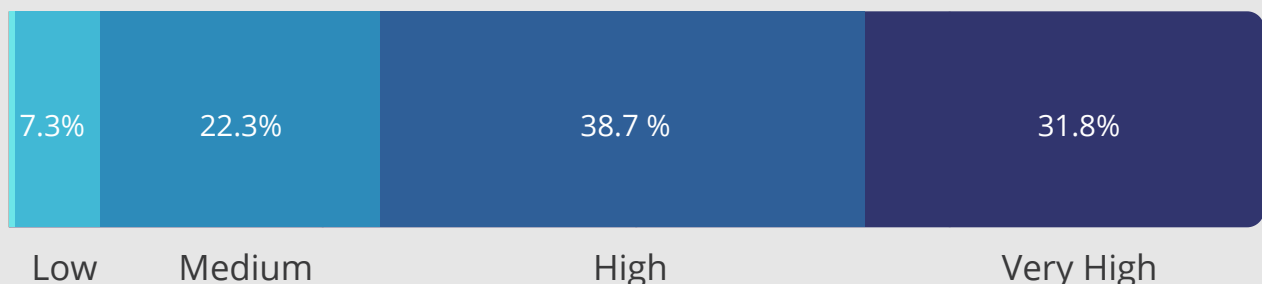
Despite the challenges of the work, 80% of survey respondents said they take pride in their job. In addition many interviewees described positive feelings about their work, including its stability as well as having a chance to serve the community or help people.

People don't understand why I enjoy being a corrections officer ... Yeah, it's got its hardships and its difficulties. And there are things that some days are little more crappy than others. But I'm able to take care of my family, so that's what I like about it. *Officer, Mid Career*

## Just Another Day

Some participants described their job as easy, boring, or just another day, often suggesting few to no impacts on their personal or professional life. These participants were less common than those that mentioned either negative impacts on their life, but about as common as those that said their job impacted them positively. Most participants who felt this way about the impacts of the job on their life were early career or late career staff, with few in between.

## Corrections Staff at SCF Report High Levels of Work-Related Stress



# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Turnover and Staffing Levels

Staffing levels at SCF are critically low, and contribute to a cycle of stress, overwork, job dissatisfaction, and turnover which accelerates as staffing levels drop. As of January 2022, there are 164 open staff positions in SCF out of 766. Staff shortages have recently gotten worse. Many staff members think that a lot of turnover is due to poor treatment of staff by the department, by management, or by other staff. When asked what they specifically feel contributes to turnover, they express most concern about overwork, unexpected holdovers, lack of adequate job preparation and support for new hires, and stress and strain due to poor communication and dangerous working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated turnover amid public health concerns, state vaccine mandates, and mask requirements.

The turnover rate probably is the hardest, because you can teach, and teach, and teach, and teach, but you'll never get on top and retain a good crew because you're always getting someone new. You always got the new guy. Everyone was the new guy at one time, but it's just a high risk of mistakes, and communication [problems] with offenders and staff.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

Due to staffing shortages, staff are frequently working overtime and being held over involuntarily for double shifts. Many staff and incarcerated people expressed concern over the safety of tired staff.

We're way understaffed. People are working way too much overtime. And it doesn't give them enough time to recharge their own batteries before having to deal with some of the people we have to deal with here. Overly tired people, their tempers are shorter.

They react more than anticipate because they're just so damn tired. And I think that, as far as a lot of the people, is part of it.

*Educator, Early Career*

While many are leaving the department, few are joining. CDOC has been unable to fill open positions and incoming academy classes have been small. CDOC has recently lowered the minimum age for hiring from 21 to 18. Many staff perceive that this, too, is a self-perpetuating cycle, as it feels like there are fewer and fewer requirements for joining the ranks.

I think sometimes it's like a body in place is better than nothing... and I just wish that they would not be so desperate to hire people that they would really take a look at what they're getting.

*Officer, Early Career*

We have some people working [multiple] shifts. Now you can't tell me that that's safe for them or safe for us. Not only are they in a bad mood after that much time, they're tired. They can't think straight. It's for their own safety they can't think straight, but it just causes problems because they're just irritable and bad mood because they're so tired. They should not be allowed to work [multiple] shifts. And I think they should be limited on the number of double shifts that they work in a week.

*Rodney, Incarcerated<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Management and Leadership

One area of focus for the interviews conducted with correctional staff at SCF was understanding their interactions with and perceptions of facility management. Consistent with the organizational literature across professions, it was clear from the interviews that correctional staff's relationship to facility management is deeply intertwined with their overall job satisfaction and sense of self-efficacy at work.

As with many topics discussed in interviews with correctional staff, staff expressed a range of experiences and perceptions related to management. Some spoke highly of management, finding them approachable and appreciating their efforts – even when imperfect – to be responsive to the needs of staff and incarcerated people. Many expressed concern or frustration with what they perceived as an overly authoritative structure that disregards staff contributions and expertise, and a lack of support and care for staff as individuals. Some staff were able to reflect on the disparate experiences of staff with the management team, helping to explore inequities in access to the management team experienced across staff. In short, many staff think that "who you know" matters.

## The Ivory Tower and the Glass Palace

Corrections staff at SCF widely view management as disconnected from staff and the day-to-day concerns of the facility. A substantial number of staff interviewed for this project expressed their opinion that managers are removed – theoretically and physically – from the day to day work taking place on the ground in the facility. Staff variously referred to the administration building as the "ivory tower" or "glass palace" because it is where decisions are made from above, in a place removed from

and inaccessible to staff. As a result, many staff members think that management sometimes makes uninformed decisions that do not reflect the realities of the experiences of staff and incarcerated people. Many expressed frustration with having to follow directives without having a chance to give meaningful input.

---

So, I really think that I'll be honest with you. I think that our management doesn't get us. They don't spend any time with us. They think that they can manage it from afar where you can't. You've got to be on the ground. Sometimes we haven't seen our management team forever and I think that's wrong. I think we should be able to see them ... there's no, "Hey, this was really the problem here because I've seen it with my own eyes. I've experienced it. I can see that staff is frustrated.

*Sergeant, Mid Career*

---

A lot of the problems with morale are because management makes choices that we have to follow without getting our input on them first, and if they do get our input, a lot of them don't really care about the input. They're just going to do what they want to do and asking us is a formality at that point. It's kind of like making a menu for your family and saying "What do you guys want?" and serving the same thing every day no matter what the menu says, and they just have to deal with it or don't eat.

*Officer, Mid Career*

---



# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Communication is Optional

One of the strongest themes of this research is that participants experience problems with communication at every level across the facility. Communication from the management down through the ranks is not as quick or clear as staff would like it to be. They acknowledge that workload pressures and rapidly changing conditions in the prison make these issues hard to address. However, as one Lieutenant summarized, in the department “communication is optional.”

Survey results reinforce the negative view that staff have of communication from management.

- **Less than 10% believe that management communicates clearly with staff.**
- **Only 13% of staff feel that management is transparent about issues that affect staff.**
- **Only 13% feel that staff are given the opportunity to understand the reasons behind policy decisions.**

In interviews, staff say that they may not hear about a change or a directive until after it is already finalized or even implemented, or at times incarcerated people may somehow be informed of a change before they are. Staff can feel undermined when they do not have the most current information. In addition, they are less likely to buy-in to initiatives when they haven't been consulted or do not understand the rationale.

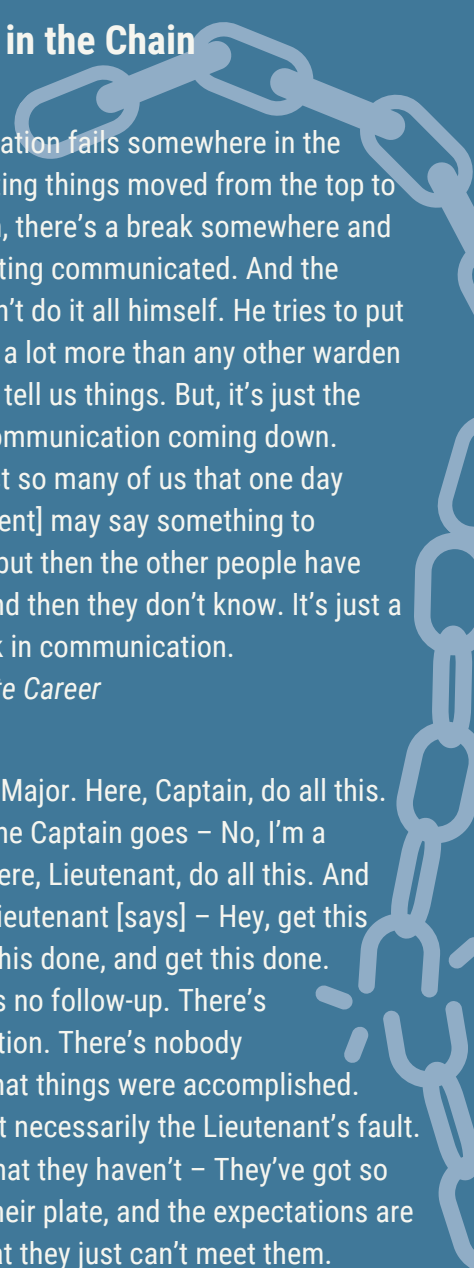
---

Had the reason behind the decision been communicated, people probably would have been more supportive, even if they didn't agree with it. Because they would have understood why the decision was being made that way.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

---

## A Break in the Chain



Communication fails somewhere in the chain. Getting things moved from the top to the bottom, there's a break somewhere and it's not getting communicated. And the warden can't do it all himself. He tries to put out emails a lot more than any other warden ever did to tell us things. But, it's just the break in communication coming down. There's just so many of us that one day [management] may say something to someone, but then the other people have days off and then they don't know. It's just a huge break in communication.

*Officer, Late Career*

Well, I'm a Major. Here, Captain, do all this. And then the Captain goes – No, I'm a Captain. Here, Lieutenant, do all this. And then, the Lieutenant [says] – Hey, get this done, get this done, and get this done. And there's no follow-up. There's no verification. There's nobody ensuring that things were accomplished. And it's not necessarily the Lieutenant's fault. It's more that they haven't – They've got so much on their plate, and the expectations are so high that they just can't meet them. There's no assistance or follow-up from their Captain. *Captain, Mid Career*



# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Mixed Messages Related to Policy

In interviews, some staff expressed frustration with what they perceive as mixed messages. They experience the evolving practices that management is encouraging them to engage in as inconsistent with departmental policy. Those in this group explicitly said they were indifferent to the contents of the policy, but wanted clear direction.

---

I don't care what the policy says. I don't care what they want me to do, but they better match... I'm a very simple type of person. Tell me A, I'm doing A. You can't tell me A, and expect me to do B, because you aren't going to get B.

*Lieutenant, Late Career*

---

## Communication During COVID

During the COVID-19 pandemic, issues related to communication seemed to get worse for both staff and incarcerated people. This was in part because of the uncertainty of the situation, but also because policies and practices changed so quickly in response to infection and health risks. In addition, staffing shortages and unit lockdowns due to illness and quarantines meant running all facility operations, including cooking and cleaning, with an overworked and overwhelmed slate of staff. This exacerbated the communication breakdowns that were already endemic in the facility - breakdowns between management and staff, within the chain of command, and with incarcerated people and their loved ones.

## Pressures from Above

Managers at SCF recognize these communication issues and understand staff's frustration. But they want staff to know that they are not always clearly communicated with from headquarters, and they are often under pressure to enact directives with little time and limited resources. Administrative staffing data show that there are 1.6 managers for every 100 staff members, and 0.5 managers for every 100 incarcerated people at SCF. These pressures are experienced by mid-level managers and supervisors (Captains, Lieutenants, and Sergeants) as well, who are caught in the middle of these communication and resource issues.

The clear lines of communication – I find that out two days ago [that the department is reopening visiting]. Even the warden didn't know. We're all doing it. It's like, okay every facility, get ready for visiting. We put a plan together. It's bumped up by two weeks. You have now two days. That line of communication, it's not as streamlined as it could be. It's one of those - and I don't know what impedes that - but I do wish that you'd have more opportunity to catch up to that instead of feeling like you're behind on it. *Manager*

I wish I could say I spend more time one-on-one with staff, but I'm just so busy. And then, as a supervisor, whenever you walk into any sort of unit you're bombarded with questions from offenders. Any time I walk in, I have so many certain duties that I need to nail out and get done in that short timeframe. And then, when they come in, yes, that's part of my job, but it's hard to balance. It can overwhelm some people to try and figure out what my staff needs, make sure they're not missing anything, "Here's the new communication for the day," and then also address any issues with the offenders. It's just a balance. *Lieutenant, Mid Career*

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Staff Perceptions of Danger in Recent Policy Changes

Another strain on the relationship between staff and management is disagreement on policies and practices that have recently been implemented at SCF. Specifically, many staff feel that their well-being is subjugated to the well-being of incarcerated people, and that in instances where the interests of staff and incarcerated people conflict, the interests of incarcerated people will be prioritized by management. They feel that management's pursuit of "normalization" has eroded accountability and respect, and has created more dangerous situations for staff.

- **81% of staff feel that recent changes at SCF have made their jobs more dangerous.**
- **89% of staff feel that the well-being of the people incarcerated here is valued more than staff well-being.**

Interview responses reveal the details of these concerns. A number of staff feel that assaults on staff are not responded to appropriately and that many managerial decisions do not make sense in terms of promoting staff safety. Others claimed that recent changes have diminished the respect that staff receive from incarcerated people.

Recent policies and practices that are particularly controversial include relaxing the dress code for incarcerated people and expanding access to large screen TVs and video game consoles. Many staff also perceive that changes to restrictive housing policies (reducing the maximum stay to 15 days) reduce accountability and increase danger. In general, there is a sense among many staff that management has reduced penalties for incarcerated people who cause harm and that staff will not be backed up if a conflict or dangerous situation occurs.

---

So, even inmates are seeing that they can assault staff and there's not a huge issue and staff are seeing the same thing. It's made staff not as safe because inmates know there's not much gonna happen if they do. And, so that's an issue.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

There's no respect for the staff out there from the inmates. A lot of them there is, I will have to say that, but it's that they can do as they please and there's no rules, no regulation. They just living like they're out on the streets and the way the lifestyle they had before.

*Officer, Late Career*

---

I personally credit our rise in violent offenses to this mentality of trying to de-sanction the offenses that they currently have. Because if they can get away with grabbing an arm, next time they're gonna get mad, and, "Well, I got away with this," and they're gonna escalate it. I mean, don't get me wrong. I've never been one to be super petty and go write them up, write an offender up for every little sanction I could find or anything, especially if I could just talk to them about it. But I think that it has led to an escalation. In all honesty, the department today, it is the most dangerous I've ever seen it.

*Case Manager, Late Career*

---

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Staff Attitudes Toward Incarcerated People

This research reveals that staff exhibit a range of attitudes toward incarcerated people. Survey data shows that the vast majority of corrections staff at SCF do view it as their job to support incarcerated people (89%) and feel they should be protected from cruel and inhumane conditions (94%). In interviews, the vast majority of staff emphasize that they view incarcerated people as human and that they treat them with respect. Further, many interviewees described how treating incarcerated people as human results in more successful interactions and relationships with them.

---

You know it's business of human beings and so we can label people and try to put people in different positions or places in life, but we're still all at our core humans and we still have basic desires and basic needs. And one of my biggest things here is that I try to treat everybody as a human being and I try to recognize what that human being needs and I try to provide that for them in the best method that I can.

*Lieutenant, Early Career*

---

The first couple of years that's how it was until I realized that if I treated the inmates like people who were just trying to get along just like I am, then I get a lot more success out of them. Like, treat them like people, someone who just made a mistake and now they're being punished for it and that it's not my job to continuously punish them.

*Officer, Mid-Career*

---

Negative attitudes toward incarcerated people are also present in staff perspectives. Some staff interviewees do view incarcerated people as "bad people." In addition,

survey responses point to a lack of acceptance of incarcerated people as fully redeemable, both directly and indirectly, such as by saying they would not want to live next door to a previously incarcerated person. While most staff say incarcerated people deserve a second chance, they also demonstrate conflicted beliefs about redemption.

- **11% of staff say they do not believe rehabilitation is possible for people incarcerated at SCF.**
- **19% of staff say that "only a few people incarcerated here are really dangerous."**
- **59% of staff say they would not want to live next door to someone who was previously incarcerated.**

---

I think evil is evil and these guys are gonna be evil until the day they die. I think a lot of society is like, "Oh, they're human beings. We've got to treat them as human beings." I agree, but if you act like an animal, then I'm gonna put you in a cell and leave you there until you act like a human being.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

---

## Staff Self-Perceptions Differ from How Many Incarcerated People Perceive Them

Results from the staff survey reveal that almost all staff members believe that they have a good relationships with incarcerated people (IP), and most feel that they are respected by and try to build trust with incarcerated people.

- **97% say they have a good rapport with IP.**
- **78% say they feel respected by IP.**
- **82% agree that they try to build trust with IP.**

Notably, these estimations contrast with what incarcerated people say about how staff treat them.

- **Only 46% of incarcerated survey respondents say that staff at SCF treat them with respect.**
- **Only 24% say that staff make them feel safe.**

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Putting up Boundaries

To manage the complex landscape of relationships in the prison, staff build up different types of boundaries between themselves and incarcerated people. These can be personal boundaries (i.e., communicating or creating positive relationships without revealing personal information or being “too friendly” so as not to be compromised) or mental boundaries (i.e., refusing to look up charges so that they do not treat them differently or change their opinions of someone).

---

Communicate with offenders. Just try not to be too friendly, because you get too friendly – you give you an inch, they’ll take a mile. That’s just the way they roll. So, you gotta find a nice balance with that.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

---

I try to be personable. Not personal, personable. And I try to understand where they’re coming from.

*Educator, Early Career*

---

We can look these guys, their history up any time, but I try not to practice that because I don’t want that to set the tone

or put me into a bias against them, because it’s not fair to them, it’s not fair to their future chances, and it’s also not fair to whatever could turn from that, whether it’s gonna make a changed individual or not.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

Staff are put in the difficult position of having to interact with hundreds of different incarcerated people every day while they try to apply the rules of the institution to a range of complicated scenarios. They subsequently develop a conflicted view of incarcerated people – recognizing that they are human but also that they must develop and adhere to strict boundaries in their interactions. Staff further feel like they are having inconsistent, even contradictory conversations with management regarding these interactions.

Survey results show that almost all staff members feel that they know how to maintain appropriate boundaries with incarcerated people. However, when asked about their colleagues, staff respondents had a worse view. Only two-thirds agreed that people who work in SCF have appropriate professional boundaries with incarcerated people. Over half expressed concern that friendly relationships with incarcerated people undermine staff authority.

- **98% of staff agree that they have a clear understanding of how to maintain appropriate boundaries with the people incarcerated here.**
- **66% of staff agree that people who work in this prison have appropriate professional boundaries with people incarcerated here.**
- **51% of staff agree that they are concerned that friendly relationships with incarcerated people undermine staff authority.**

These findings illustrate the complexity of interacting with incarcerated people as human beings while having to constantly consider how these interactions look to other staff, and the possibility that an incarcerated person is taking advantage of them in some way.

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Equitable Pay and Pay Scale Compression

In addition to communication issues, staff associate low morale in the facility with lack of adequate compensation and rewards for good performance. Interview data suggests that many staff joined the department for the pay and benefits, and that this is a major motivating factor for continuing employment. Many staff acknowledge that they are unable to find better pay elsewhere, at least in the same geographic area.

---

There's no place that pays like this.

There's been a lot of times – in fact, I always almost weekly look for another job where I can get about the same pay, still have insurance. And it's just not out there.

---

*Case Manager, Late Career*

However, many staff also express frustration about pay inequities and lack of raises to reward years of service and meritorious work. Via survey,

- **Only 32% of staff survey respondents feel that they are paid fairly relative to other staff.**
- **Only 11% feel that they are adequately rewarded for good work through raises and promotions.**

Interview data reveal that recent changes to salary structures are largely behind the diminished view of fair pay. More experienced staff point out that, as the department has raised entry level pay to counteract staff

shortages, the pay structure has become flattened.

Infrequent raises also contribute to salary compression.

In some cases, supervisees make more than their supervisors. In other cases, staff with decades of experience are paid similarly to new staff. These realities contribute to low morale, which leads to more staff departures and retirements. In 2021, CDOC made some attempts to rectify pay scale issues. Assessing the extent to which these have fully or partially resolved concerns about pay inequity will be important.

---

Those are just hard things to get past. They really are. I mean, you can be pro – you know, “I wanna be great at my job,” but then when you find out people are making more money and they have less responsibilities, it's kind of hard to swallow once in a while.

---

*Case Manager, Late Career*

## Evaluations and Merit Raises

For most staff performance reviews are not meaningful, and the merit raise process is inaccessible. A number of staff perceive that performance reviews are copied and pasted from the previous year, or that it is a given they will receive an average ranking. It does not seem possible to them to achieve the highest ranking, which would result in a pay raise, so it is not a source of motivation. They feel their good work goes unseen, and for some, this diminishes their motivation.

There's only three ratings [in our Performance Management Plan]. You are either a 1, which means you're not performing, 2 means you're performing at expectation, and 3 is you're exceeding expectations. A vast majority of staff are getting 2s. The ones that are failing are getting 1s, and the rare few that are excelling are getting 3s. Now, there's not much incentive to get 3s because to really be rewarded for a 3, you have to get all 3s, and once you get all 3s, then you can get a bump in pay – a small bump. When they got rid of step raises and they brought in this plan it killed morale because they say it's obtainable. I've seen it very, very rarely, and it's only for a select few in certain positions that have the opportunity. But the day-to-day grinder, they don't get a shot – and that's the majority of staff – because it's out of reach. I think that's the way it was designed, sadly, through the budget. *Lieutenant, Mid Career*

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Feedback on Job Performance

Outside of annual reviews, many staff feel that feedback mechanisms are infrequent, and focused on wrongdoing. A clear majority of staff think that management and direct supervisors are quick to punish them for mistakes and issues related to job performance, but rarely provide any positive feedback or guidance.

- **65% of staff feel that management is too quick to discipline them.**
- **Only 14% say that management acknowledges their performance when they do their jobs well.**

Most staff say they try to do the right thing regardless of these problems that affect motivation, but it seems apparent that their motivation is impacted.

---

The thing that bothers me is if they don't like something, they won't say anything until it's blowing up out of proportion. And like I've told them I don't need a big parade. I don't need a pat on the back. But I do need them to say, "Okay, you're doing this right. Or maybe you need to improve on this a little bit more." Instead of waiting until we're mad at you because you screwed up.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

## Promotion Opportunities

Promotion is one way that corrections staff can move into leadership roles and advance their careers within the department. All applications for promotions in the department are scored by a team of reviewers made up of CDOC staff from other facilities. This external team also conducts and ranks first round interviews. The facility is then provided with the names of the top six candidates, who they may interview and choose from

onsite at SCF using an internal hiring committee. Final decisions and rankings are shared with all applicants.

Some staff members we spoke with believe that it is easy to promote, while many others find promotion to be a frustrating process. A common perception among staff at SCF is that "it's who you know" that determines whether or not you will be promoted or given other opportunities. **Only 23% of staff survey respondents said that staff are fairly selected for promotions at SCF.**

---

I don't feel very confident with the ability to advance at work because – and this doesn't fall in age, race, or gender, but it falls into that category of, well, you're not my friend, so I'm not gonna promote you into this position because I have a friend over here that's applying for it. Because of that favoritism, you can sit there and look at the list of people that have applied for a job, and out of that list of people you already know exactly who's getting promoted.

*Officer, Early Career*

---

Contributing to this view is dissatisfaction with the transparency of promotional processes. In short, applicants do not usually feel they are getting honest feedback about why they were not promoted.

---

Every time I try to figure out things, you guys are, "Nope, this is not the way we do things." And it's mostly when it comes to climbing rank... knowing how to jump those loops and cut those corners, certain individuals seem to have access to that information but somehow every time I keep asking for it, I'm not finding it's not easy to find.

*Officer, Early Career*

---



# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Training and Mentorship

Staff have mixed views on the quality of training and mentorship that they receive. While a vast majority (87%) feel that they have the skills to do their jobs well, lower percentages of staff attribute this to what they learned in the CDOC Basic Training Academy (47%), or orientation and mentorship at SCF (54%). Just over half (52%) say they have enough training to reduce conflict in the facility. 62% of staff survey respondents say their supervisors do a good job supporting them, suggesting that the quality of supervision and mentorship varies widely across the facility.

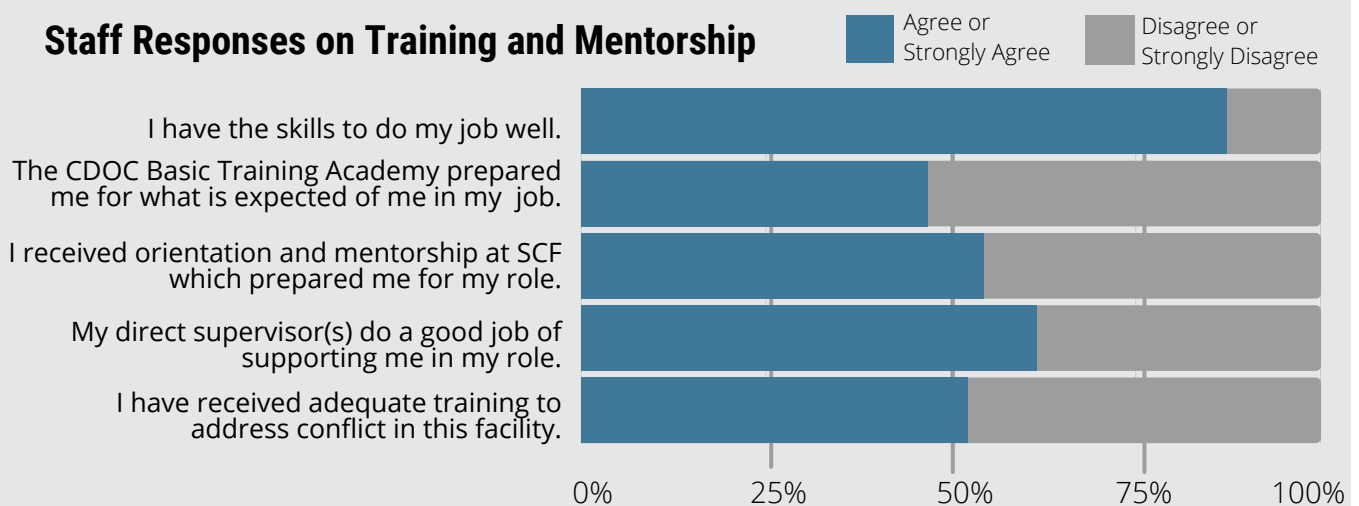
It's a scary place for new people coming in, so we need to be there for the staff and make sure to, "Hey, are you okay? If you understand what we're doing, do you understand why we're doing it? Do you need more training? Do you need more time with another individual who's got more experience?" Instead of - we got this time [for field training], and I don't know how long it is now, it's 20 days or something. Is that enough?  
*Lieutenant, Late Career*

In interview data, many staff members argue that good training and mentorship are critical because things can change in the prison very quickly. However, many supervisors report that mentorship is difficult because they are so busy and there are so many demands on their time and attention. The recent staffing shortage has likely made finding time for mentorship even more challenging.

There's not a lot of mentorship in a lot of areas, I think. I think we're missing that. I think people don't want to invest their time, they don't think staff will be here long enough, it's not worth it. They've got enough on their plates.  
*Case Manager, Mid Career*

I think the downfall to some of it is – some people just need someone to like mentor or emulate and I don't – like I would love to do that for people, I just don't have the time.  
*SCF Manager*

### Staff Responses on Training and Mentorship





# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Staff Relationships

Staff report that their colleagues are a source of both comfort and stress. Many staff interview respondents said that their interactions with other staff were generally good and that they got along with most. However, a number of these respondents also noted that there were some "toxic" people at work who were difficult to get along with, who made their jobs more difficult, or who even made their jobs dangerous.

Some staff respondents characterized SCF staff as "one big family" - with functionality and dysfunctionality that mirror actual families. These respondents often noted that other staff were the only other people who truly understood the pressures and effects of the job, and so they rely on one another for counsel and support like family members do. It was also argued that staff need to be able to trust that other staff will "have their backs" if things go badly at work.

Results from the staff survey clearly show that, on the whole, staff members feel that they have good working relationships with their coworkers.

- **94% say they have a good working relationship with coworkers**
- **89% say they feel respected by other staff in their area/shift**
- **80% say they feel respected by other staff in the facility**

The difference in the "I feel respected" measures parallels findings that relationships between staff and incarcerated people are better within units than across the facility. In other words, proximity may help staff members understand and trust each other.

## A Big Family

No matter what happens at the end of the day, it is a huge family, because we're correctional officers. And at the end of the day you build these bonds with other officers that nobody else can really understand. I can go home and I call friends and I can be like, "Hey, there was a fight in the kitchen, and my adrenaline is up to here. And I need to calm down." And they wouldn't know what to do. Or I can call another correctional officer and be like, "Hey, this is what happened." "Oh yeah. I heard about it." Let's talk you through things that you can't do with anybody else." So, it forces you to pretty much become a family, even with the dysfunctional units of the family, you're still like, "That's my family."  
*Lieutenant, Early Career*

---

I'm in a good place over here in [unit] so I have really good, good relationships. In fact, I have some of my best friends work on this shift with me and I think we got some really good people over here. So it's been pleasing to work in this area. Because sometimes it's not so good when you go to a different area.  
*Officer, Mid Career*

---

# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Frustrations with Fellow Staff Members

While, for the part, staff say they get along well with their colleagues and have groups that they trust and rely on, they also speak about staff in general as a major source of frustration and job-related stress. **Over half of staff survey respondents (57%) say that their coworkers make the job more stressful.**

Through both surveys and interviews, staff at SCF point to workload inequities and inconsistent behavior from other staff. There is near-universal agreement that some staff carry a lot more of the load than others (96%). In addition, only 63% of staff survey respondents say that they can rely on other staff in the facility. A number of problematic types of staff members were cited by interview respondents. These include "dirty staff" who bring drugs into the facility or engage in serious misconduct, lazy staff including those who are "retired on duty," and those who escalate conflicts that make the job more dangerous.

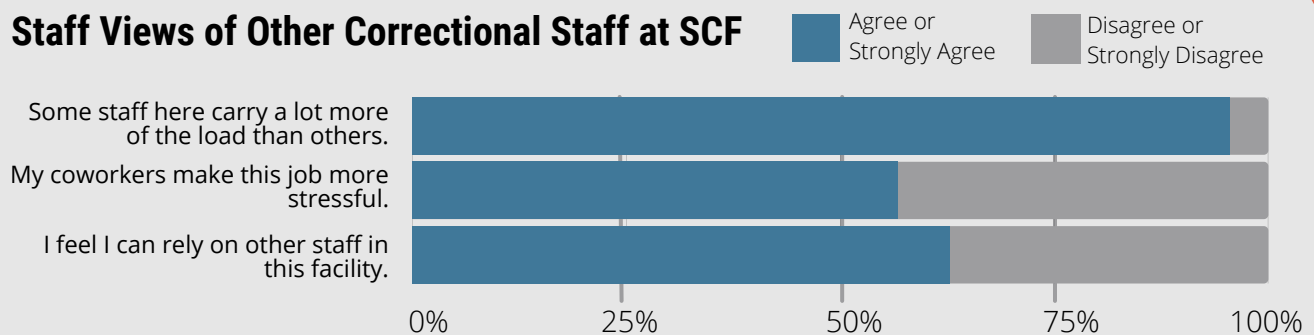
Staff say poor communication skills and overly controlling behaviors lead to charged situations that could have been avoided. Interviewees emphasized that these "toxic" staff put everyone else in danger. More than a third of staff say they cannot rely on their colleagues. In addition, some staff were frustrated by unprofessional workplace behavior, such as engaging in arguments over the radio, being disrespectful to their coworkers, gossiping.

You know what a ROD is? It's a staff member who's close to retirement, so they're Retired On Duty. Basically, they're for staff to carry ... They're still in there in those positions that they should be fully engaged, and they're not. It's sad. But it is what it is. It's a system, and I bet if you talk to me 30 years from now I'll probably be in the same state. *Lieutenant, Mid Career*

So, the dirty staff create problems for us. I have to depend on those dirty staff if I'm in a bad situation. I have to depend on those now dirty staff to come fix what's happening to me, and I can't trust those people, because they're intentionally going out of their way to make my life hard, so why would I want those people helping me out? *Sergeant, Mid Career*

I've been in situations where I was with a very toxic staff member who almost got both of us assaulted, but because of the way that I treat inmates, I was able to diffuse the situation and be able to treat them respectfully to get out of it before either of us got hurt. *Officer, Mid Career*

## Staff Views of Other Correctional Staff at SCF



# THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

## Findings Related to the Work Environment, Staffing, and Leadership

- SCF is in a difficult place organizationally. While the incarcerated population has recently decreased, so has the staff. Retirements and departures have left the facility very short-staffed—which has become an increasing burden during the COVID pandemic. Management has also been under pressure during this time, with many demands forced upon them due the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic.
- While some staff perceive positive supports from management, many staff perceive management as disconnected from the day-to-day realities of the facility, and often, managerial decisions as arbitrary and ill-informed.
- There is also growing tension as management rolls out "pro-offender" policies and practices that many staff perceive to be dangerous or compromising of their boundaries with incarcerated people.
- Corrections staff generally want more opportunities to give input, better communication about changes, and more support from management to do their jobs safely.
- Staff point to pay inequity, opaque evaluation and promotion processes, and inadequate training and mentorship as other causes of job dissatisfaction. At the center of many of these problems is the issue of communication. Many staff do not feel effectively informed about pay changes, how to promote, and how to get better at their jobs.
- Staff generally get along with one another and find support from colleagues, but "toxic staff," "dirty staff," staff who are "retired on duty," and others who do not do their job well are significant sources of stress. Many staff say other staff are one of the biggest sources of stress in their job.

### Opportunities for SCF

- Improve all lines of communication, particularly from management to staff.
- Allow staff meaningful opportunities to provide input and be a part of decision-making processes.
- Reduce pay inequities and consider more meaningful merit structures.
- Offer more responsive feedback during evaluations and on a regular basis.
- Increase transparency in promotional decisions.
- Provide more training and structured mentorship opportunities for staff - especially newer staff.
- Foster cohesion and mutual support that already exists in many work areas.
- Remove or reassign staff that put others in danger.

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## The Benefits of Effective Programs

One area of agreement across staff and incarcerated people pertains to the importance of effective programming. Incarcerated people and staff in SCF both express substantial support for having meaningful program, employment, and treatment opportunities that can promote growth and progression toward better outcomes. Large proportions of incarcerated people report that:

- **Programs at SCF have helped them grow as people (56%)**
- **Teachers have helped them meet their goals (45%)**
- **Peer-led (“offender-led”) programming has benefited them (47%).**

A quarter of incarcerated survey respondents (25%) claimed that programs help them cope with the stress of being in prison.

Interviews with incarcerated people illustrate the key ways that programs have helped them evolve and improve themselves. Many report that meaningful programs helped them to learn and gain new skills, change their mindsets, become better people, feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves, and experience trusting relationships with teachers and volunteers.

When discussing what has been helpful to them during their incarceration, many incarcerated interviewees mentioned programs, including Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, GED and college courses, cognitive behavioral classes like Why Try and Moral Recognition Therapy, volunteer-led programming including religious programs and arts workshops, and peer-led programs offered by other incarcerated people. Most importantly, they value having access to a range of programs that meet their personal needs and goals.

I know when I participated in [Therapeutic Community], that was the hardest thing I've ever done in prison. It was the hardest program, it was the hardest classes, everything was hard about it. It was not fun. I poured my guts out in that [program], but you know what? I came out in the other side, I believe, a better person for it.  
*Ronnie, Incarcerated<sup>1</sup>*

Everybody that I've ever talked to that went to the [Northeastern Junior College], they all say the same thing. Their attitudes change. All of a sudden, they're just different people. It teaches you how to think and you're interacting with a professor, a real person on the streets like we are right now. That was by far the best.  
*Joey, Incarcerated*

[Crossfit has] really given me the tools to fight my addiction, wage war on it, and beat it. It made me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself and that being in here, we could be a part of something that was without the convict mentality, where it doesn't matter who you are, everybody's pushing forward to goals. Having accountability. *Adam, Incarcerated*

There's a poetry class on the high side, and [the teacher] who taught the class. I would see that he was observing of my actions in the way that I carried myself, but he gave me a chance [to do an apprenticeship]. I was absolutely thrilled that he trusted in me enough, he believed in me that I could do something like that. It was hands on. I love doing it. I love working with my hands. He gave me that chance. *Javier, Incarcerated*

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Staff Support for Programs

A vast majority of staff at SCF also believe in the potential of programming to benefit incarcerated people.

**Staff overwhelmingly think that rehabilitation is possible for those incarcerated in SCF (85%), and that educational and vocational programs have a positive effect on incarcerated people (88%).**

Almost all staff also believe that programming should be available to incarcerated people. Over 90 percent of staff survey respondents said that educational, vocational, drug and alcohol treatment, religious, and legal programs should be easily available to incarcerated people. Staff support was lower for fitness and sports programs (63%), arts programs/hobby shop (77%), and mentoring/peer assistance (83%), but as the percentages indicate, many staff think these programs should be easily available as well.

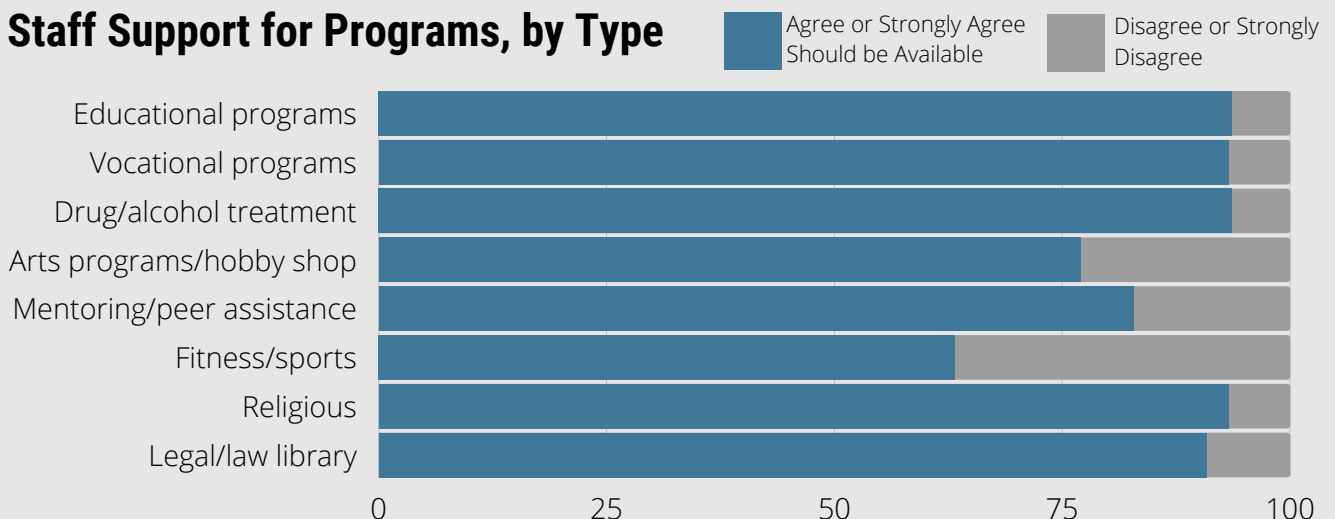
Open-text responses from the staff survey elaborate the key reasons that they support programming for incarcerated people, focusing on the potential for

programs to help incarcerated people change for the better, deliver applicable skills for post-release, address negative behaviors and attitudes, and provide venues for incarcerated people to have pro-social interactions with staff and others. Many staff were disappointed by the reduction in programs that occurred due to COVID-19 restrictions and ongoing staffing shortage.

I do not feel that incarcerated people should be continued to be punished in prison. I feel they should be held accountable for the actions they make "in prison" not before their court date. I feel that having a healthy relationship and talking with inmates helps not only gauge their attitude for the day, but also helps them to vent their frustrations and problems so they don't take it out on a staff who isn't capable or prepared to effectively deal with the situation. Having programs helps the inmates keep their minds off of hurting staff and helps them to get rehabilitated.

*Sergeant, Mid-Career*

## Staff Support for Programs, by Type



# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Program Enrollment at SCF

SCF offers a range of program opportunities for incarcerated people. These include educational, vocational, and treatment programs, as well as fitness programs, religious programs, and arts and hobbies. The vast majority (91%) of incarcerated people at SCF have taken advantage of one or more of the programs during their time at SCF; however, enrollment in individual program opportunities is relatively low. Survey data indicate that:

- **Fewer than 60% have ever taken education programs.**
- **Fewer than 55% have ever taken job training programs.**
- **Fewer than 52% have ever taken treatment programs.**

The most accessed programs are religious and educational programs, while the least accessed programs are arts and mentoring. Current program enrollment is particularly low, as during the COVID pandemic many programs have been shut down due to health risks as well as low staffing levels and the need to reassign educational staff to cover security shifts.

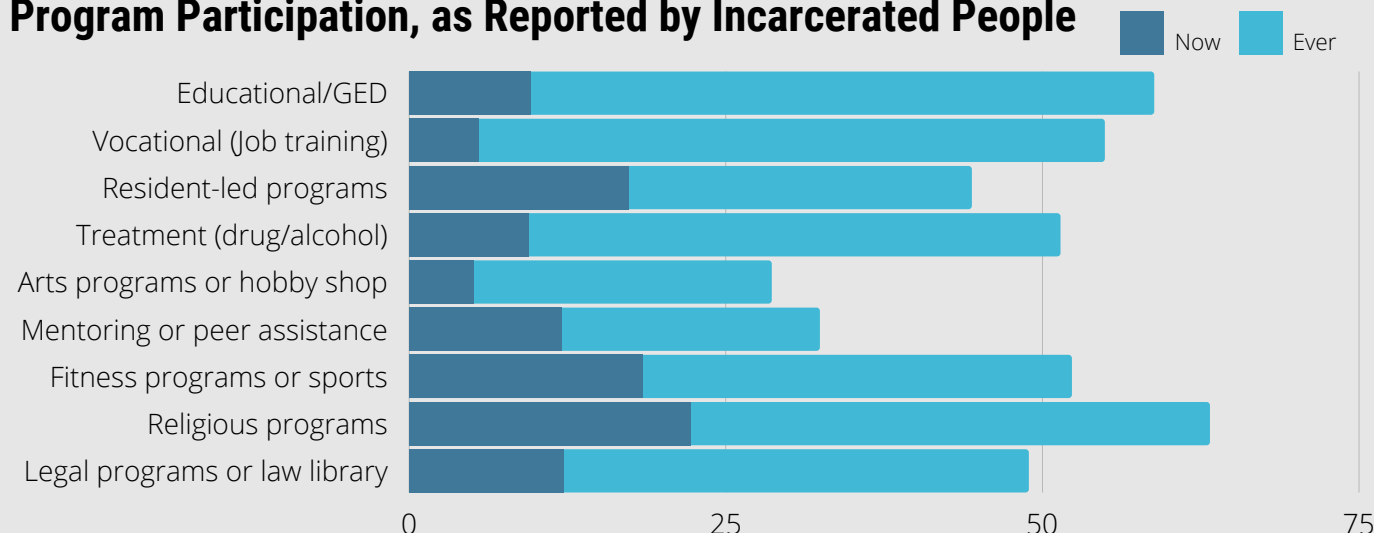
## Limits on Program Access

Even prior to COVID, but especially during, access to programs was not unlimited. Research data, including interview and survey data, suggest that getting into programs can be difficult. There are long waiting lists, eligibility requirements (such as being within a certain time of release), and access is often perceived as inequitable.

More information, more programs, but make it to where people can get into them. It's crazy how there's such a waiting list. When they do these classes, there's always a waiting list. How do you have such a waiting list when - Everybody should be in class. They shouldn't just be, "Okay, these people are in the kitchen. These people aren't doing anything. These people are waiting for a class and these people are in class." There should be enough. The whole time we're here, we should be doing something.

*Guillermo, Incarcerated*

## Program Participation, as Reported by Incarcerated People



# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Difficulties of "Getting In"

Via survey, incarcerated people reported how difficult or how easy they feel various programs are to access. While no program seems universally "easy" to get into, religious programs are viewed as the most accessible, with educational, fitness, and resident-led programs following. Vocational programs, drug and alcohol treatment, and mentoring and peer assistance, and arts programs appear to be the most difficult to get into. Interviews with incarcerated people illustrate these dynamics, and highlight their frustrations with not being able to get into programs.

When there's a lack of resources, I think it brings out bad things in people so it's like, I've heard a lot of complaints about different things that bother them like, "Well, this person got this and I didn't," which is super fair. Getting things is not a bad thing, but it should be afforded to everyone.

*Dennis, Incarcerated*

## Eligibility Requirements

Interview data also illustrate the complex dynamics of program admission. A key reality that shapes these dynamics is that because of limited resources, programs can only admit those who are closer to release, leaving those with more time left to wait.

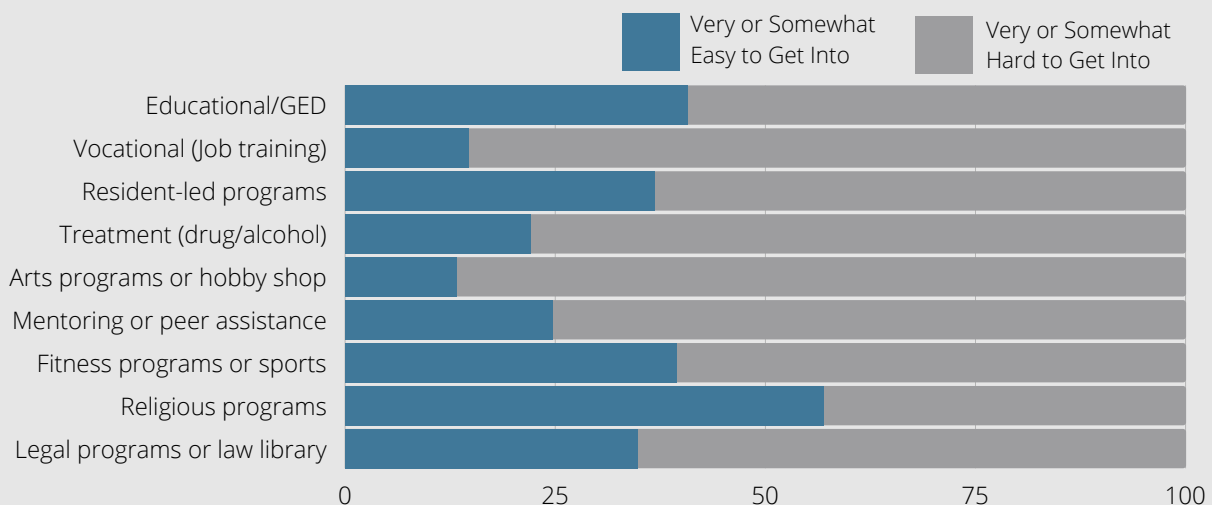
Almost every program here, according to my case manager, at this facility you have to be five-year short to take it.

*Jacob, Incarcerated*

There are issues that I want to address with my alcoholism, with my addiction, that I can't address because I don't really necessarily know how to right now. I can't take the TC or the Therapeutic Community for 22 years. 22 years from now I'll be able to address my problem because I have too many years before my PED [Parole Eligibility Date] or my MRD [Mandatory Release Date].

*Frank, Incarcerated*

## Ability to Access Programs, as Reported by Incarcerated People





# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Opportunities for Those With Long-Term and Life Sentences

A number of incarcerated interview participants note that preventing people with long-term or life sentences from participating in programs is a missed opportunity to improve mentorship in the facility, as well as the overall climate. They shared that many long-term community members have the experience to lead programming that could improve the knowledge and skills of others. "Offender-led" (peer led) programming also leverages non-staff resources and can help improve relationships between staff and incarcerated people.

---

I feel that they should still invest in the value of those who have experience to influence the multitude, but if you're not educating me, how can I educate or influence someone else?

*Andrew, Incarcerated*

---

## Peer-Led Programming

"Offender-led" (peer led) programming also leverages non-staff resources and can help improve relationships between staff and incarcerated people.

---

They've allowed us to do a lot of programs, inmate-led programs. We've been doing all these different programs, mentorships, just different types of classes and stuff like that. I think that helps a lot. It's that they're allowing us to step up and be the buffer between staff and the inmate population.

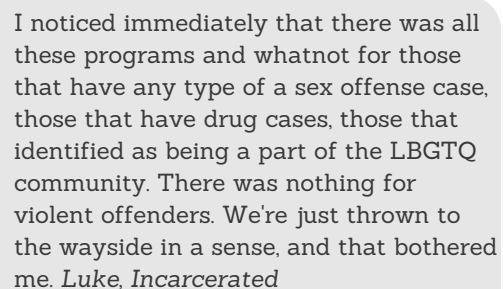
Most of the people that are involved in these kinds of things are people who have the right head on their shoulders. They're doing the right thing already, that's encouraging.

*Frank, Incarcerated*

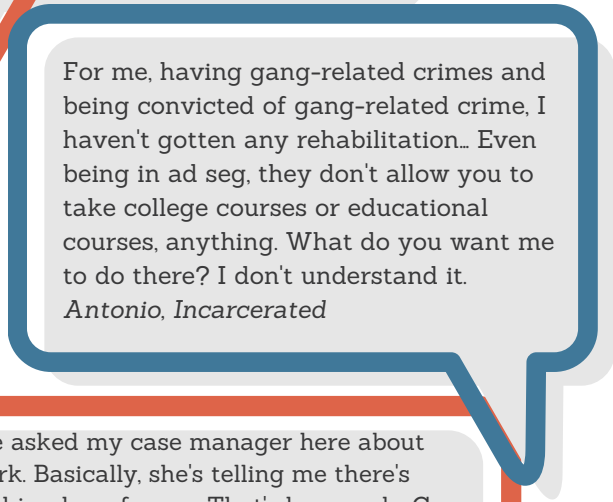
---

## Inequities in Program Access

Many incarcerated people perceive that getting into programs is often a matter of "who you know" or whether you belong to certain privileged groups. They perceive that factors like their offense type, gang involvement, gender identity, race, and physical disabilities affect their access to programs. There is widespread perception that program access is inequitable, and that certain incarcerated people are prohibited from participating in certain programs.

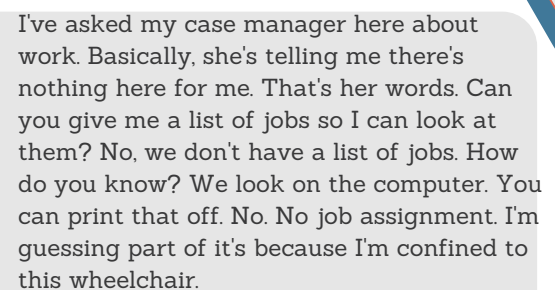


I noticed immediately that there was all these programs and whatnot for those that have any type of a sex offense case, those that have drug cases, those that identified as being a part of the LGBTQ community. There was nothing for violent offenders. We're just thrown to the wayside in a sense, and that bothered me. *Luke, Incarcerated*



For me, having gang-related crimes and being convicted of gang-related crime, I haven't gotten any rehabilitation... Even being in ad seg, they don't allow you to take college courses or educational courses, anything. What do you want me to do there? I don't understand it.

*Antonio, Incarcerated*



I've asked my case manager here about work. Basically, she's telling me there's nothing here for me. That's her words. Can you give me a list of jobs so I can look at them? No, we don't have a list of jobs. How do you know? We look on the computer. You can print that off. No. No job assignment. I'm guessing part of it's because I'm confined to this wheelchair.

*Rodney, Incarcerated*

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Desire for Meaningful Opportunities

Despite the perceived positive impacts of effective programming, many incarcerated people lamented the lack of such opportunities, and highlighted inequities in program admission practices. Incarcerated people that we spoke with repeatedly and consistently asked for help from the institution. They expressed a strong desire to do something positive for themselves and others. Many incarcerated people wish to further their education, to gain useable skills, to do meaningful work, and to be able to support their families or give back to their communities through their efforts.

---

I want to take everything... anger management, drug and alcohol... Anything that has to do with building my mind and my character, I want it. I learned now that I became who I was from having conversations with the wrong people. Now I want to learn things that I should have been learning when I was younger. I believe that we're no different than the plants outside that we grow. That depending on how you're cultivated would determine the richness of what you become. In here, there's no water.

---

*Andrew, Incarcerated*

Survey responses indicate that many incarcerated people at SCF lack opportunities to pursue personal growth.

- **48% say they can participate in activities that promote well-being and growth.**
- **72% say they are often being bored at SCF.**
- **57% say they are "doing time" rather than using the time to make positive changes.**
- **92% say they are doing the best they can with the opportunities they have.**

---

We got to deal with what we did and be punished for it. I get that, but there's got to be something more with discovering more opportunities, education. I like to teach people. I'd love to be doing that, but now I sit in a room all day and make no money and do nothing.

---

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

Interviews with incarcerated people elaborate these numbers and demonstrate the importance of using time positively. Incarcerated people expressed that the lack of program opportunities at SCF leads to idle time, boredom, hopelessness, and often exacerbates mental health problems and violence.

What [programs] do is steer you clear, thinking about things like that. Now, my head's in a book. I'm studying so I don't pay attention to [the bad stuff], but then, you still have that empty shell. You don't have a family or community or anything positive to do. It fills that void.

*Joey, Incarcerated*

You got to give people something to do. Right now, the only thing people have to do is some of them go out there and they socialize on the rec yard. Most of them, they go out there, nothing but gangs. They all get in their little groups. Then there's fights and all that kind of good stuff.

*Rodney, Incarcerated*

You get these numbers. "Your PED is 2038." Despair. No light at the end of the tunnel, so let me start beating the [expletive] out of people to take my aggression out. Let me start doing heroin to start numbing that pain. Help? I haven't gotten help in here. It's sad. I wish I could but the fact that you would put a guy like me who needs drug help into a drug-filled environment with no help. How does that work?

*Thomas, Incarcerated*

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Job Training and Employment

Incarcerated people express a strong desire for meaningful job training that will help them succeed upon release, as well as employment opportunities that allow them to meet their needs, support their families, and pay restitution and court costs. Of incarcerated survey respondents:

- **Only 27% say they would choose not to have a job assignment if allowed.**
- **87% say that they prefer meaningful work to no work at all.**

In interviews, incarcerated people discuss what they would consider to be meaningful work—ranging from practical training in occupations in which they are likely to work when they are released (for instance, restaurant work, landscaping, welding, and construction) to professional education (for instance, in computing and technology) that would elevate their job prospects.

---

People wouldn't mind, say, cooking in the kitchen if they were taught how to cook, but they're not. They throw stuff together. They can tell it looks horrible. If they were taught how to make it better, there's some pride in it. It's the same with the guy that cuts the lawn. It's funny because they usually have a guy that cuts the lawn. It's the same guy and he does it for years because he ends up enjoying it, he takes pride in it. You never know what somebody is going to take pride in. They do. There's plenty of people that want to do something or learn something.

*George, Incarcerated*

---

## Shell Shock

With no rehabilitation, no access to a skill or trade that's relevant to being released back into community. I'm starting once I get there instead of already being prepared upon my release. I want to use this time now. Preparation is now. It's not for later once you get there because a person, say, for instance, the word being institutionalized, meaning that if this is all you knew and your whole dependency was on DOC, going to the free world where you have to be independent and self-reliant, it's shell-shock. *Gerald, Incarcerated*

## Work Programs at SCF

Work programs are an emerging area of focus in CDOC and at SCF, but also a challenge. The department's Take TWO program (Transitional Work Opportunity) places incarcerated people in community-based employment where they make a minimal industry wage and where they can pursue continued employment when released. The program benefits the community by filling staffing shortages in struggling industries. Up until 2022, SCF partnered with a chicken farm in Roggen, Colorado to provide Take TWO work placements. However, this partnership ended due to complications regarding inmate labor practices.

Other popular job training opportunities at SCF have been through the department's Correctional Industries, including a dog training program and a furniture restoration business. In 2022, the furniture shop was phased out of SCF during a statewide reorganization of Correctional Industries. This followed the closure of SCF's culinary program (a full service training restaurant serving staff and prison guests) in 2020 due to issues involving resale licensure. To date it has not reopened.

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Limited Opportunities for Meaningful Work

While some meaningful job training and employment opportunities exist at SCF, open spots are hard to come by. Many incarcerated people say that they are ineligible to participate in them because of the time they have left in SCF or other case characteristics that prohibit them from being admitted. In addition, 84% of incarcerated survey respondents say that getting a good job in the prison depends on who you know. The most common job assignments in the prison are working in the kitchen or as a porter (cleaner).

- **Just half (51%) of survey respondents say that their work assignment benefits them.**
- **Just a quarter (24%) report that they have opportunities to learn a career they can use on the outside.**

They got a program going now called Take TWO where people get to go and work outside the facility. They come back every day and they live here, but they get to experience the real world for hours at a time. For the warden to say, "I'm going to invest in this program and I'm going to do everything I can to allow it to happen," it's great, but he's also saying, "There's only this select group that can do it. If you don't fit these certain criteria, then there's nothing we can do for you."

*Jake, Incarcerated*

I got my A+ certification and my Cisco Networking certification. That was 2 years ago. Now, I haven't really touched a computer in two years. There's no consistent training or a daily activity with a computer to keep you up on it. If I sat down and started doing that right now, I'd be lost. That's a perishable skill. That's not what an employer is looking for.

*Gary, Incarcerated*

## Inadequate Pay

On average, incarcerated survey respondents say they are paid \$0.52/day or just over \$15 per month for their work in facility job assignments, though those who work in Correctional Industries or in the Take TWO program can make much more. Up to 40% of their pay may be automatically deducted toward restitution and court costs. With the remainder, they must pay for any personal items beyond soap and toilet paper, including stamps and supplies for correspondence, clothing items, and supplemental food.

- **59% of survey respondents say they do not make enough money to meet their basic needs.**
- **69% say they cannot pay down their restitution and court costs.**
- **80% say their families are struggling because they are not able to provide for them.**

You mean besides being completely worthless and not being able to provide for my children and not be able to pay bills or restitution or make even a significant amount of money to where I could have the things I need in my cell? Those all weigh heavy on me. Those have brutalized me, to be quite honest. I hate it. I've never felt so worthless until I came to prison. Not even being able to pay the restitution and even none of it amounts to nothing except me in a wasted life. *Matthew, Incarcerated*

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Re-Entry Planning and Parole Processes

In interviews, incarcerated people spoke about experiences of re-entry planning and parole with confusion and frustration. First, many feel there is no clarity about what the board is asking of them in order to succeed. They wish for more guidance from case managers to help them understand their needs and prepare for release. Only about one-third (34%) say their case manager helps them meet their goals.

Second, when they do go up for parole, they receive either unclear reasons for their denial, or are given reasons that they feel they have no control over – such as their past offenses or their “unmet criminogenic needs” when they believe they have taken any and all programs that are available to them.

---

Everybody's getting denied every year now for parole and on their papers it says "untreated criminogenic means due to this and due to that," but nobody's getting put in classes. Nobody's getting put in none of this. It said that on mine every year and they would not tell me what that meant.

*Julio, Incarcerated*

---

## Re-Entry Preparedness

As a result of significant gaps in program and job opportunities, as well as unclear case planning and parole processes, many incarcerated people we spoke with felt unprepared for successful re-entry. They reported a range of issues - from practical needs like social security cards and drivers' licenses to major gaps in their abilities to get jobs, housing, or medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment support. Very few incarcerated people (9%) and only about one-third of corrections staff (34%) believe that SCF does a good job preparing people for release.

---

Housing is a huge one for me. What am I going to do? The best bet for me would be go through a halfway house situation and there would be more support and more channels in that situation, but I might not be accepted, right? Then parole would be the next-- well that's not a great situation. Because I really don't have somewhere to parole to. . . If I don't have housing or I don't have ID, well how do I support myself in this situation? It can fall apart really easily. We don't have – right now, with education and programs, it's a mess. It really is.

*George, Incarcerated*

---

“So, we've continued down this road of not telling offenders exactly what concerns people have about them that hold the keys to their freedom, but we sleep well at night because we planted trees and we painted the walls - good things, but I don't wanna pass up great because we're concerned with being good. If we simply just let every offender know exactly what the concerns the community board and the parole board have about their release, and then provide them accessible opportunities to quell those concerns, we're missing the boat. Every day somebody is getting denied community corrections, denied parole board because they didn't know. Not exaggerating to make the point. They didn't know. If they only knew they would have done something different. Sergeant, Mid Career

”

# PROGRAMS AT SCF

## Findings Related to Programs and Opportunities for Incarcerated People

- Incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF agree on the importance of programming and vocational opportunities to help incarcerated people succeed upon release. Many say programs help incarcerated people meet their goals and prepare for re-entry, reduce idle time, and create positive interactions between incarcerated people, staff, and community volunteers.
- Most incarcerated people report that they would rather have "meaningful work" than no work at all. "Meaningful work" includes work that offers a purpose or benefit to themselves and others, that provides job training they can use in the community, and that pays enough to meet their needs, support their families, and pay restitution and court costs.
- SCF offers a range of programs and vocational opportunities, with an emerging focus on community-based job training programs. However, spots are too limited. COVID has made this situation worse.
- Program opportunities are sparse, as are meaningful vocational opportunities that translate into marketable job skills. Many incarcerated people cannot participate in these opportunities because of their sentence lengths, charge types, and other factors.
- The limited number of slots in programs and for "good jobs" makes admission extremely competitive. Many incarcerated people are frustrated with their inability to participate, and perceive that favoritism is a major factor in who gets selected.
- Many incarcerated people are often bored and feel powerless to participate in programming that will help them meet their goals. Getting paroled feels like a bind, in which they need to participate in certain programs to obtain parole, but these programs are not available to them.
- Re-entry planning and parole processes are not transparent. It is unclear to many incarcerated people what they need to do to meet their parole requirements, and even when they feel they have done so, they feel they may not be paroled. Afterward, they receive little helpful feedback about why they were denied.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Explore ways to expand programming opportunities, including creative community partnerships, peer-led programming, and online classes.
- Review program admission practices to maximize the share of incarcerated people that can participate.
- Expand work opportunities that deliver marketable skills, purposeful work, and adequate pay.
- Improve re-entry planning processes and supports for incarcerated people, including a realistic assessment what is available to them.
- Address the clarity and transparency of parole processes, especially around criminogenic needs.



# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Medical, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Need at SCF

The incarcerated population at SCF has a high volume of medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment needs. Through an individual assessment process, CDOC indicates the level of need for incarcerated people. At SCF, on a scale of 1-5:

- **33% have medical needs rated 3 or higher**
- **36% have mental health needs rated 3 or higher**
- **73% have drug and alcohol needs rated 3 or higher**

This section describes these needs in greater detail, and explores system capacities to meet the medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment needs of incarcerated people at SCF.

## Healthcare System Capacities at SCF

From interviews with both incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF, it is clear that the facility currently lacks adequate personnel to meet the medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment needs of all of the people incarcerated there. Personnel data provided in January 2022 indicate that there are 1.6 medical professionals (including physicians, nurses, and dentists) and 0.4 behavioral health specialists per 100 people incarcerated at SCF. These clinicians must balance daily needs with a constantly accumulating backlog of cases.

Medical personnel at SCF that we spoke with estimated that they have only 15% of the staffing they need to meet the needs of the population. This includes responding to requests for care, diagnosing and treating patients, and appropriately supervising the administration of medications. Behavioral health clinicians at SCF reported caseloads exceeding 125 clients, making it impossible

to provide much more than occasional check-ins or crisis support. In their own words, current staffing shortages among healthcare professionals are critical. Recently, SCF has worked to expand telehealth options for incarcerated people; however, only 14 telehealth visits were provided in the last quarter of 2021.

To help meet the needs of the incarcerated population, SCF employs incarcerated people to assist with the provision of health and mental health services. Offender Care Aides (OCAs) assist other incarcerated people with medical needs and disabilities, helping them with a range of tasks such as getting where they need to go. Mental Health Peer Assistants provide peer support to other incarcerated people who need help with mental health symptoms. These programs are generally viewed as beneficial by both staff and incarcerated people. However, neither program is intended to replace professional health and behavioral health care, but rather supplement it.

## The Effects of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has taxed an already stressed system at SCF. Available doctors, nurses, and even behavioral health professionals were pulled from their regular duties to care for COVID-19 patients, to help facilitate testing and symptom monitoring, and to administer vaccines. The medical need in the facility was overwhelming, with simply not enough personnel to meet it. In addition, there is some indication that mental health needs of incarcerated population grew as they dealt with the deaths of loved ones, isolation, illness, and fear of contracting a deadly disease and dying in prison. Even in 2022, COVID-19 related medical needs remain a strain on SCF's system capacities.



# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Medical Needs of Incarcerated People

Incarcerated people that we interviewed described a range of medical problems that affect their quality of life, mobility, and overall wellbeing. These include everything from allergies and chronic skin irritations, to gastrointestinal problems, to diabetes and high blood pressure, to acute injuries and chronic pain. While some, like those involved in SCF's CrossFit program, described improving their physical health during incarceration, most described their health as declining or deteriorating since being in prison. Via survey,

- **20% say their health is "bad" or "very bad."**
- **30% say their health is "so-so."**
- **50% say their health is "good" or "very good."**

## Accessing Medical Care at SCF

The ability to access timely and effective medical care was a frequent topic of research interviews with incarcerated people at SCF. Participants described difficulty in getting prescription glasses, mobility aids, and dietary accommodations. They described how health problems that would typically be manageable grew worse through neglect or inadequate treatment. One participant described being unable to get a dental filling replaced, resulting in long-term tooth pain and eventually missing teeth. Another had an untreated ear infection which resulted in permanent hearing loss. Others described being unable to control their weight or blood sugar due to poor nutrition and lack of medical management.

---

I'm supposed to be on a monthly chronic care regime... Now when I come here, they put me on a quarterly chronic care. But I haven't been seen by doctor for six months. I send kites in. I either get no response or the response says, "We will see you on your next visit with the provider." In the meantime, my blood sugars have gone from about 140 to over 300, and I can't see the provider.

*Rodney, Incarcerated*<sup>1</sup>

---

“Everybody's sick here. I was a healthy individual when I came here, and all of a sudden, I'm sick and the guy who lives next door is sick. Interviewer: What kind of sick? Participant: We don't know. That's the thing. Getting medical treatment here is impossible for 2,500 people. I think they have three nurses on duty. They're juggling a lot and if you're not dying, if you're not missing a limb or having a heart attack, then it's really hard to get anything accomplished.”

*Jake, Incarcerated*

Interviews with medical staff indicate that the medical department – like the rest of the facility – is extremely understaffed and underresourced. In short, resources are often allocated to the most severe cases, and it is difficult to provide meaningful preventative care.

---

You know, our chief medical officer always states that we're guardians of a very specific population and a very finite amount of resources. And so, while yes, somebody who might have a shoulder issue might be able to have an M.R.I. and see orthopedics, it's also not life-saving, limb-saving emergency stuff. I get, on the flip side, to the inmate, it's super-important.

*Healthcare, Early Career*

---

In addition, receiving medical care is not free. In most situations, incarcerated people pay \$3 per visit to request a medical appointment. While services will not be denied, they may incur a negative balance on their account if they do not have funds available. This policy is found in CDOC Administrative Regulation 700-30.

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Poor Response to Serious Medical Needs

In interviews, incarcerated people described situations in which they believed there was a clear medical emergency, but that medical treatment was still not able to be accessed. Medical staff affirm that it is difficult to appropriately triage requests for medical treatment due to the volume of requests. This, too, takes time and medical expertise.

---

[A man] fell working in the kitchen last week. He was throwing up blood for five days in his cell. He filed a medical emergency, they said, "We're going to put you on a waitlist for a medical emergency but we think you're faking it." To the point that they had to rush him out of the facility and give him immediate surgery. Two days ago, he still ain't come back.

*Jose, Incarcerated*

---

However, participants spoke about feeling voiceless when it comes to getting their medical needs met. They described seeking medical attention and not being believed about what they were experiencing, or having that experience diminished. Some were able to have family members call and help ensure they got treatment, while those without support systems were more likely to go without medical attention.

---

There's a couple of good nurses here that actually do believe you when you've got something going on and will help you, but mostly you're ignored. It feels really bad.

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

---

---

We got a guy on our unit. He's dying. He's terminal. He's got the colostomy bag and he's got the catheter bag. This guy's bag came out. They tell him he has to wait because there are other people in medical right now. He can't get it fixed. He's leaking everywhere but you won't take that poor fellow to medical? He's bad off. He's eaten up with cancer. To me, there's something very wrong with that but what it comes down to is the little fellow that's dying, he's a nobody. He has nobody way to represent him. He has no voice.

*Mark, Incarcerated*

---

Several participants spoke about how untreated medical needs contributed to daily frustration, conflict with staff, and "acting out" by incarcerated people in order to be heard.

---

I have rheumatoid arthritis real bad. When it's cold out, I can't stand to be outside very long. To get your psych meds was an hour and a half to three hours standing out in the cold, and I quit doing it. I couldn't do it anymore and couldn't find anybody to push me either. I quit taking my meds. They took that as a rebellion against taking my psych meds, which it was just that I couldn't stand the cold. They thought I was being "Cool Guy." I'm not participating in what was recommended, while in simple words I couldn't stand the cold.

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

---

# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Mental Health Needs of Incarcerated People

Incarcerated people that we interviewed spoke about a variety of mental health needs, including anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and serious mental illness characterized by hallucinations and dangerous behavior. They describe both mental health needs which pre-dated their incarceration, as well as new mental health problems brought on by their experiences in the prison. **One in four survey respondents incarcerated at SCF indicated they have thought of suicide in the prison.**

In addition, approximately one third of survey respondents indicated that they feel symptoms of anxiety and depression most or all of the time.

## Survey Respondents Endorsing Anxiety and Depression Symptoms

| How often do you feel...       | Most or all of the time |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Nervous?                       | 27.8%                   |
| Hopeless                       | 34.1%                   |
| Restless or fidgety?           | 33.4%                   |
| That everything was an effort? | 34.1%                   |
| Happy?                         | 25.9%                   |
| Interested in life?            | 50.5%                   |

These guys here, some of them - especially in MCC - they don't need to be here. They need to be in a hospital. And I can't shake the fact that we're not helping them. Nobody's helping them.

*Educator, Early Career*

## The Effect of Prison on Mental Health

Incarcerated people at SCF describe both mental health needs which pre-dated their incarceration, as well as new mental health problems brought on by their experiences in the prison.

- **22% say their stress level is "low" or "very low."**
- **29% say their stress level is "medium."**
- **49% say their stress level is "high" or very high."**

I keep having these - It keeps locking my brain out, I'm getting blank, I keep forgetting stuff. Being stuck in this environment, it erases a lot of mental capacity, I guess. I don't know how to say it. It erases a lot of things. Not having a social contact and being able to speak to people on a regular basis, it's not very good personally.

*Angel, Incarcerated*

All this, what does it do? It takes away all your hope, all your life, you just feel like, as I said earlier, it's a dumping ground. Somebody dumped me here and is going to forget me here. This is just a junk yard to get people off the streets. Like I said, there's no rehabilitation, no correction, this is a dumping ground.

*Rodney, Incarcerated*

# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Mental Health and Re-Entry

Both corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF spoke about the importance of resolving mental health issues in order to support re-entry. Many incarcerated participants felt that mental health problems had contributed to their original offense and/or were likely to make their re-entry more difficult if left untreated.

---

Sad to say, this is my second time here. First time, I did everything that was required. I looked at what people wanted and gave them that. Went to every class, did everything outside but working on my inside. I got out there. I was successful, stayed away from criminals and all this other stuff, but I didn't work on the issues that was inside. Anger, resentment, not feeling worthy, certain aspects. So when I was faced with a situation, everything erupted. All the instructional tools of "just stay away from this person and this won't happen" did not work.

*Steven, Incarcerated*

---

## Inadequate Mental Health Treatment

Participants who have attempted to access mental health treatment described difficulty in doing so. One participant described experiencing what they felt was an urgent mental health crisis, but not being able to get an appointment for three weeks. Another, who found his therapist helpful, indicated that he was only able to see them every 45 days. Behavioral health staff that we interviewed agreed that they are not able to provide regular therapy to their clients due to large caseloads.

---

[The psychologist that sees me] has been helpful in helping me to calm down and remind me, and gives me plenty of material to read and exercises to do. She's good. I wish I could see her once a week, that would be cool, but that's not happening and that's because of her workload.

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

---

I don't believe that it's overly effective to help anyone to only see them once every six months, but having 135 people on my caseload makes it difficult to see people weekly or even biweekly.

*Healthcare, Early Career*

---

Several participants described experiences with mental health treatment as not very helpful, lacking continuity (by the time they see the clinician again, the clinician does not remember what their needs are), and focused on distribution of medication. Behavioral health staff feel their time and their tools are limited.

---

When I first started, we were able to give out journals to the guys and stress balls and things like that to help them. Well, they've taken that all away. They give us some regular lined paper and tell us to give it out, but the problem is there is no privacy, so the COs can take any of the stuff away for whatever reason or take and read the journals, so they're not really private.

*Healthcare, Early Career*

---

# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Why Would You Want to Talk to Mental Health?

More than one participant spoke about their hesitancy to seek or accept mental health treatment because they perceived it would limit their opportunities inside or count as a mark against them during an upcoming parole hearing.

My mother died. Two months later, my father died. I wasn't happy about it, so you seek out that help. They talked to me. They typed all this stuff down. They said, "Oh, he's clinically depressed." What happens is, it hurts you because you have a rating. "1" basically says you have no mental health needs. "3," for me, is I need to take medication for such things like anxiety. Then there's "4" that says, "You're clinically depressed." But that information sticks with me. If you want to go to a lesser security level, you can't be a level 4. Instead of helping you, it hurts you. You can't progress when you see mental health because they say, at these lower-level securities, there is not that type of supervision. Why would you want to talk to mental health?

*Greg, Incarcerated*

## Mental Health Crises Exacerbate Problems

Many incarcerated people at SCF identified mental health problems and crises as a catalyst for drug and alcohol use inside the prison, as well as for conflicts between incarcerated people and with corrections staff.

That's how things get exacerbated in prison is that we lack emotional outlets, we lack physical outlets, and so people internalize things. That's why, unfortunately, people turn to illicit things that go on in prison to try to escape, or they will bottle it all up until they finally explode and then lash out, do something stupid.

*Patrick, Incarcerated*

Several participants discussed their sense that correctional staff were unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to the mental health needs of incarcerated people. As a result, some staff are likely to treat mental health and substance abuse symptoms as disciplinary problems rather than health or treatment issues. In moments of crises, some staff - either knowingly or unknowingly - escalate mental health symptoms rather than helping to resolve them or ensure that an incarcerated person gets the care they need.

I see guys that suffer from mental illness. I see how a lot of guards think it's a joke. I have been in the mental institution. I know when I see something wrong - when I see a guy struggling with mental illness. They don't be faking it. Having an abnormal condition is hard for them. I guess the guards and other people don't realize that the person probably can do a lot better if they was on medication. These guards, they make jokes of them. They tease them to the point where they react and then they get thrown in the hole. Then they come back and they're the same type of person again. I see it daily how they've been treated. A lot of stuff like that has happened in the DOC. They get a lot of people here that have mental illnesses, severe mental illnesses, and they don't get the right treatment.

*Craig, Incarcerated*

# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Substance Abuse Needs of Incarcerated People at SCF

Substance abuse and addiction are perhaps the most prominent health and behavioral health issue among incarcerated people at SCF. Approximately 3 out of 4 are classified by the department as having significant substance abuse treatment needs. Many incarcerated people that we spoke with linked substance abuse or addiction to their reason for being in prison.

## Alcohol and Drugs in Prison

While ideally, prison is a place to get clean, incarcerated people at SCF describe drug use inside as pervasive and dangerous. They say that both alcohol and drugs are readily accessible for those who want it. While some corrections staff identify the mail as a pathway for drugs, others point to "dirty staff" as a key source of illicit drugs in the prison. This creates a dangerous situation for a population with untreated substance abuse conditions.

---

There's people in here who are getting high all the time. I choose not to. It's not because I couldn't or I don't have the means or any of that or the opportunity.

*Ronnie, Incarcerated*

---

The guys that were on heroin are still on heroin. We're not bringing it in. It comes from somewhere, right?

*Ryan, Incarcerated*

---

Interviewer: What were you doing before you were incarcerated?

Participant: I was drinking and using. I had gotten to the point to where drugs and alcohol were running my life. Almost every decision I made back then at that time of my life were based on getting high, drinking, doing whatever it was to fill that need that apparently that I had at the time. Everything else was just secondary. Everything else there was at the time wasn't even secondary, it was even farther back on the list than that.

When I think back about it now, I'm very disappointed. It makes me feel bad that I would let that take over like I did, like I let it, and the end result was terrible. I really believe that ain't who I am, that's just who I became and who I was at the time, because there's so much more to me than that. Other people's, just their thoughts, their needs, all about other people were all secondary. They didn't matter to me.

It was when can I get high? Do we got enough money for some more beer? What can I do to escape life, I guess, I don't know how to put it any other way than that. It ain't who I am, but it's who I was at that time. I'm ashamed of it. I'm ashamed. I know I didn't get a life sentence, and I trust that I'll have another go at it, and I plan on making the best of it, clean and sober. *Ronnie, Incarcerated*



# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Substance Abuse and Re-Entry

In research interviews, incarcerated people at SCF recognized that dealing with substance abuse and addiction issues is important for successful re-entry to the community. Many say they want to live in a drug free community and receive treatment that will help them deal with their addictions.

I just think a lot of people that came in with drug problems, they leave with drug problems. If you have them, if you don't address those issues, you're going to come back. I just think people get out, they're not prepared to go to the streets. If all you know is criminal behavior, and I give you \$100 and put you in the middle of Denver, especially if you got a drug problem, you're going to get high, want to keep getting high. You're going to go do the only thing you know how to do, which is crime.

*Johnny, Incarcerated*

## Lack of Treatment Options

Incarcerated people report that there is little to no substance abuse treatment available at SCF for most of the population. There are long waitlists for the 96 beds in SCF's Therapeutic Community (TC), and many people

with addiction problems are not eligible to take TC for years or decades, until they near their release date. Instead, medical management is often used without accompanying treatment and support.

I haven't seen no AA classes here so I just read the AA book, the 12-step book. It's something that I think a person that has alcohol addiction need to do. It's a lot of stories that you have to tell to get out, you know what I'm saying? If you keep stuffing it, and you keep stuffing, it is about to blow somewhere. It's like a Pepsi can. You shake it up, you open it, all over the place. You keep letting that crap build up on you, and build up on you – it's just devastating.

*Kevin, Incarcerated*

We're giving Suboxone to people who are entirely unstable. They don't have any piece of their life together. They're struggling with addiction, and all we're doing is giving them medically assisted support without a treatment option, without a support system in place. That's a dangerous game... There's no actual interventions. There's no strategies in place. There's no support network. That's terrifying to everyone.

*Lance, Incarcerated*

There's a very superficial layer of what we call treatment. There's a very heavy layer of discipline. When someone fails a drug test, there's a discipline piece. DOC will hold you accountable. We'll ratch[et] you up, we'll regress you to the high side, hell, we'll even throw you in a pod with a bunch of other junkies and drug dealers. We'll do that for you, but then you're on your own. Then you can apply for TC [Therapeutic Community]. You'll probably get a rejection letter or get put on the global waitlist, which can be in the thousands. What type of service is that? To those people who say we provide that service, I ask you this, what type of service is that? If you're a professional, you tell me what type of effective intervention that is. What we need to do is come up with real solutions that involve our community – our community, we live here. *Lance, Incarcerated*



# ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

## Importance of Peer Support

Many incarcerated people that we spoke with expressed gratitude for mentors and support networks they had formed inside. In the absence of treatment options, they found ways to help each other and help themselves. This includes SCF's Offender Care Aide and Mental Health Peer Assistant Programs, but also informal relationships and groups formed by incarcerated people.

---

We have some of the skills and the tools necessary – not to replace real treatment or real interventions, that's for the professionals – but until we have that, I think the biggest solution is that we support each other. Is that we say, "Hey man, if you're suffering from this, let us help you. Let's plan goals around getting physically right, mentally right, spiritually right. Let's balance your life out and work towards sobriety." Because nobody's doing that for these guys.

*Gary, Incarcerated*

---

## Findings Related to Healthcare, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Treatment

- Incarcerated people at SCF have a high volume of health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment needs. Approximately 1 in 3 have serious health and mental health issues, and 1 in 4 have significant substance abuse or addiction issues.
- Incarcerated people say that health, mental health, and substance abuse problems negatively impact daily interactions in the prison, their quality of life and overall wellbeing, and their prospects for successful re-entry to the community.
- Staffing levels in the health and behavioral health departments at SCF are critically low. Doctors, nurses, and behavioral health professionals have unmanageable caseloads, meaning that medical care and mental health treatment are primarily allocated to emergency or crisis situations.
- Substance abuse treatment needs are the most common health needs described by incarcerated people, but the least treated inside the prison. There are long waitlists for only a few spots in SCF's Therapeutic Community, and few to no other treatment options for incarcerated people.
- Many corrections staff do not recognize mental health and substance abuse symptoms, and use disciplinary rather than treatment approaches in response. These responses are harmful, not helpful.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Review necessarily staffing levels in health and behavioral health departments, considering level of need.
- Consider the use of telehealth and creative community partnerships to address staffing shortfalls.
- Develop substance abuse treatment programming, drawing on both professionals and peer support.
- Ensure that all incarcerated people can access treatment, not just those with an upcoming release date.
- Train corrections staff to recognize and respond to mental health and substance abuse related crises.

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Relationships as a Protective Factor for Incarcerated People

A critical determinant of how incarcerated people experience prison is the quality of their relationships. These include relationships with families, friends, and communities as well as relationships with other incarcerated people and staff members. Having positive, prosocial connections to these groups facilitates progress towards goals, reduces stress, and gives hope. Overall, we find that incarcerated people who feel more connected to other people and groups have better experiences in prison and more effectively progress toward their goals.

## The Importance of Connection

Many incarcerated people say that their connection with family or others outside the walls is one of the few things that give them hope and motivate them to keep going and to do better. Survey data indicate that the positive effects of being able to stay in touch with family and friends extends to many areas of prison life.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of incarcerated survey respondents report that they are able to keep in touch with family and friends while in SCF. We find that this is an important support resource that has critical effects on how prison is experienced. In other words, those who maintain contact experience incarceration in a substantially different way than those who cannot maintain contact.

Correctional research shows that contact with loved ones can reduce recidivism, improve health, and better educational and job achievement. Our analysis of incarcerated persons survey data indicates a range of benefits that occur when incarcerated people can stay in touch with their friends and families.

## The Effect of Relationships

Relational analyses of survey data indicate that those in SCF that can stay in touch with friends and family:

- Report better physical health
- Report lower stress levels
- Are more likely to say they have healthy ways to cope with stress
- Feel safer
- Are less likely to feel their lives are in danger
- Are more likely to say they have enough money to meet basic needs
- Are more likely to say they get enough to eat and have a balanced diet
- Are less bored
- Are more likely to say they have a purpose in SCF
- Are more likely to say they have opportunities to contribute positively to the community
- Are more likely to say they have hope for the future



# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## *The Importance of Connection (Cont.)*

Interviews with incarcerated people add important nuance to these dynamics. Knowing that someone on the outside cares about them provides perspective and offers a sense of purpose to those who live at SCF. It allows them to connect with people on the outside that offer hope and support. It allows incarcerated people to see that others share in their struggles. It allows them to see what life looks like on the outside, which also helps them know what to expect when they get out. Incarcerated people look forward to times when they can connect with family and friends, and consistently report that these experiences make their days better.

The help and support I have received is mostly from my family. It would be majority my mom once again. This angel who comes out of everywhere to save me. [laughs] My mom helps me, supports me. Physically she's come up here to visit me. Being able to hug and hold my mom is like - I can't even describe how that makes me feel. It does a lot for me, man. It encourages me, it gives me hope, it keeps me grounded, it keeps me focused, it keeps me believing, it adds on to my faith, it adds on to my hope.

*Edwin, Incarcerated<sup>1</sup>*

Writing people [is one way I cope], because it's easy to get caught up in this and think that this is all life is because this is all you know all day, every day in and out. To be in touch with people that are still living a normal life and still experiencing things and can share those experiences with you, that means a lot to me. *Jake, Incarcerated*

Yes, [I practice meditation] alone, but I have resources and support. I have a lot of pen pals and organizations or temples, whatever you want to call it... I have a lot of people that write share their experience out there. Then I'm able to see that in a lot of cases, your experience, their experience, are the same as my experience, it's just in a different environment. We have a lot of shared experiences.

*George, Incarcerated*

Right now the way I do my time, anytime I talk to my family, that's it, because I always get-- They always dropping little gems on me. Anytime I'm talking to my best friend, that's my day right there. That makes my day better. *Jermaine, Incarcerated*

Your children will let you have it.. In between them times where they're not letting you have it, they still tell you that they love you. They still show their perseverance in the things that they're doing, even though they only have to share or they're able to share with you over the phone or through a video visit or a visit, that little bit of hope that they have in you only gets projected back into them and telling them that even though I'm not out there, I still see how much you progressed, I'm really, really proud of you, and for your child to tell you that they're proud of you and the things that you're doing in here is what can really, really motivate you. Sometimes I see individuals that don't have that family dynamic and it's like I feel bad for them because what if they just had that one person to give them hope? How would their life be changed a little bit more than what it was now? Family is very important in here. Not everybody has it, so that gets difficult. *Javier, Incarcerated*

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Disconnection and Isolation

For those that are not able to maintain connections to family and friends, life is significantly worse in the prison. They report feeling isolated and lonely—and these feelings can damage their willingness to trust and rely on others. A number of incarcerated interview subjects reported that their abilities to relate to others in healthy ways has been stunted by lack of meaningful contact with family and friends on the outside.

---

Well, the blessing is I ain't got nobody waiting on me on the outside so they're not in here with me. Other than that, I don't have anybody to be intimate with, not just physically, but emotionally. I'm really out of touch with everybody in here and even in my family. All that's by landline and that could be cut off at any moment and people in here, largely you can't trust them.

*Incarcerated Participant (57)*

---

## Difficulties of Connecting in Prison

Despite how beneficial these relationships are, incarcerated people at SCF find it difficult to maintain relationships while in prison. Both the quantity and the quality of contact is challenging. Visitation in prison - whether by phone or in person - is time limited, surveilled, and highly structured. SCF currently provides the following options for connection and visitation:

- Phone calls can be made from each unit at any time incarcerated people have access to the day room. Calls cost \$0.12/minute and must be placed collect to a pre-approved list of people.

- Since April 2020, incarcerated people at SCF have had access to video visits. The family member must schedule and pay for the visit at a cost of \$2.50 for 10 minutes, or \$6.25 for 25 minutes.
- In person visiting was suspended in March 2020 due to COVID-19 and reopened in May 2021. Visits are up to three hours. A brief hug is allowed at the beginning and end, but no other physical contact. Special, longer visits for people traveling long distances can be requested and approved.

Under these policies, a substantial share of survey respondents (73%) report being able to stay in touch with family and friends while at SCF. However, they crave more regular contact with their families, and the ability to have unstructured time and physical contact with their significant others, children, and loved ones.

---

If there's no way for me to have meaningful physical contact with my significant other, then I'm probably going to lose that relationship, right? DOC does a lot to hinder and hurt and harm our ability to have meaningful relationships with the outside. I can't just pick up the phone and call somebody. I have to meet somebody first and they have to give me permission. Then I have to ask permission to put the number on my phone list, then I have to go through that. They have to accept the collect call and then they have to put money on the phone.

*Emilio, Incarcerated*

---

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Impacts on Family Relationships

The inability to stay connected with loved ones has serious impacts on the people incarcerated at SCF and their families. Many incarcerated interviewees describe feeling estranged from their own children. In addition, they describe the financial strain their families experience due to their absence, as well as their regret that they are unable to "be there" for their families for special days or for simple things like shoveling the snow.

---

As a man, as a father, as a son, I'm the protector and the provider for my family, but when I'm not there, I can't do it. The things that happen, if they're not eating right and something happens, it all falls back on me.

*Jason, Incarcerated*

---

My daughter was only four years old when I came here into the prison system and now she's 18. I don't even know who my kids are. I do, but I don't. I talk to them, I get pictures of them, but I don't. I couldn't sit here and have a conversation with them and know what they like and what they dislike.

*Julio, Incarcerated*

---

## Maintaining Relationships with Family Despite the Barriers

Incarcerated people in SCF do find creative ways to stay connected, but their ability to do so depends to some extent on their resources and how hard their family is willing to work to stay connected with them. Finances, logistics, geographic distance, and technological literacy can all make this more difficult. A number of incarcerated people noted that when they had tablets through which they could e-mail their families, this was beneficial.

---

Back then, we used to have tablets where they could email and we could email. I miss all that. Anyway, I got an email [from my granddaughter] and she asked me "Why are you in prison and how come for so long?" I was like, "Wow." I can give her some line of BS or I can tell her the truth and probably not hear back from her. I told her the truth. She wrote back to me the next day and she understood. She knows about alcohol and drugs and what they can do. She didn't judge me. She said, "I love you."

*Ronnie, Incarcerated*

---

“If we had the opportunity to change one thing about this prison, it should be something that affects everybody, not just one person. It will probably be visits. Some people can't afford to pay five bucks for a 10-minute visit, or \$15 for a 25-minute visit, or whatever the case might be, and a lot of us are from out of state. I haven't seen my family's face in 13 years. Almost 13 years so that would be nice. Make it the way to set it up a little less complicated, because you have older family members who don't understand how to do all this newfangled stuff, so to speak [laughs] but simplifying the process for them to set it up for elderly, and like I said, making the visits free. *Dennis, Incarcerated*”

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Relationships with Other Incarcerated People

Incarcerated people at SCF describe their relationships with other incarcerated people as extremely impactful. Negative interactions with other incarcerated people - such as racial tension, bullying, gang-related politics, or just daily frustrations and arguments that come with living in close quarters - add to the stress of an already stressful environment. On the other hand, positive interactions offer emotional support, mentorship, and mutual aid. These positive interactions and relationships offer great benefits, particularly where support is not provided by family or by the prison.

Interviews elaborate some of the ways that incarcerated people support one another. Other incarcerated people can understand each others' experiences in a way that the non-incarcerated cannot. They provide camaraderie and offer support. Many engage in mentoring to help others in their personal growth. Finally, they offer mutual aid, providing material resources that others are lacking, or developing self-help and religious groups.

---

A good day in Sterling, we get out on that yard and get some sun and play some ball, play some basketball. Talk among other inmates, see how you're doing. I don't care if you're yellow, black, white, Hispanic. Be as one, because that's why they put us here for, be as one. Inside of a correctional penitentiary, it can be a light. It can be.

*Kevin, Incarcerated*

---

## Taking Care of One Another

Incarcerated people at SCF describe a number of ways that they take care of each other in the absence of other supports.

I miss my celly. I had a guy that I met when I first fell and we became best friends, and we've lived together probably about six years, on and on. We just somehow ended up together, whether it was a mistake or whatever, we're really good friends. We really bounced a lot of our ideas and thoughts off each other more so than any other program or anything has done because we're both, I would say, studious people and when we have issues, we talk about them and analyze them and try to relearn and educate ourselves. I've been really lucky to have a friend like that.

*Gary, Incarcerated*

We see guys that don't have nothing and throw bags together, coffee, and some soups and stuff and hand that out. Just stuff like that, man, just stuff like that. Let people know if you need someone to talk to then move them over here. That gets heavy sometimes. You know what I mean? It gets heavy sometimes, it's a constant test, it's a constant test for me, but I know like this is the only way I'm going to stay free, man. This is the only way I'm going to save myself from me is to keep giving. The more I do that, the more I get rid of that old me that just like to take from people.

*Jaime, Incarcerated*

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Daily Interactions Between Incarcerated People

In survey data, there is evidence that both negative and positive interactions among incarcerated people are common. While 31% say they often feel threatened by other incarcerated people, 38% say that incarcerated people in SCF look out for each other. About half of incarcerated respondents note that gangs and racial tension are a problem. Almost 70% say that weak incarcerated people often get exploited and victimized. (There is more detail on safety in "The Prison Environment" chapter of this report.)

---

I say all that to say, when you get back to the question of how do we interact with each other, well, we interact the way that DOC has allowed this environment to exist. DOC has allowed an environment which is worse, in some ways, than the environment and we left. That's how we deal with each other. We're still hyper-violent, hyper-aggressive, and all the above with a little bit of hope thrown in because of efforts like yours.

*Emilio, Incarcerated*

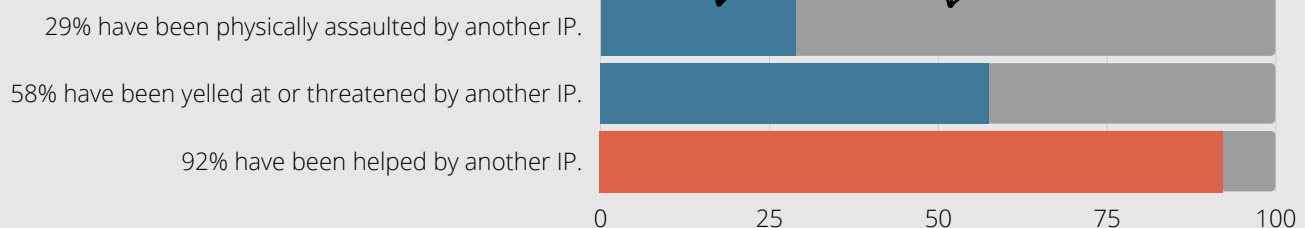
---

However, incarcerated survey respondents report that mutual aid (helping one another out) is far more common than physical or verbal conflict. **Over three-quarters of survey respondents say that they have helped another incarcerated person out in the past month, and over half say they have been helped by another incarcerated person out "a few" or "many" times in the past month.**

This research suggests that while conflict and tension are part of daily life in the facility, so are mutual aid and support. Incarcerated people regularly help one another out in a number of different ways - by providing guidance and mentorship, by being friends to one another, and by helping each other materially. These dynamics are another resource that can be cultivated in SCF. Thinking about ways to promote and structure mutual aid, mentorship among incarcerated people, and programming around mutual interests can be effective strategies to improve the culture of the facility, reduce conflict, and foster better outcomes for incarcerated people.

## Interactions between Incarcerated People at SCF

### ***Incarcerated People (IP) Report that in the Past Month***





# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Relationships with Corrections Staff

Corrections staff play an important role in the day to day life of incarcerated people. Just like peer-to-peer interactions, negative or positive interactions with between staff and incarcerated people are a major factor in making someone's day better or worse at SCF.

It means a lot to many incarcerated people to have positive human interactions with staff. In addition, many credit some staff with helping to mentor and guide them, or lift them up. Staff can make a big difference for them by helping them prepare for re-entry, by ensuring that they get their needs met inside, or recognizing their achievements. In addition, small acts of kindness and connection can mean a lot to incarcerated people. They appreciate when they can connect with staff in an adult, human way - informally discussing interests and opinions as they would in a "normal" non-prison setting.

There are certain CO's that give you a little ounce of hope that things will be better. Just to know that there are some that do have the right frame of mind to want to help us because they're not only CO's, they're counselors, they're therapists. You get to know these people, and some of them see you for who you are.

*Jose, Incarcerated*

There are staff that have come across my path that have literally been step for step next to me, helping me, guiding me in a sense, teaching me.

*Luke, Incarcerated*

When my leg was hurt, I had to have a staff member who was familiar with my injury. He had to literally walk me to medical and tell them, "I'm not going to leave until you see him."

*Harold, Incarcerated*

A lot of [COs] like to do the negative chron, but positive chrons are huge. If they recognize that you're doing exemplary work, they'll go in and put an entry in. I just got a really exemplary one from a CO here that I never, ever thought that she would give me a positive chron like she did. She recognized my mentoring, she recognized I'm helping others, and she recognized I'm helping myself to be a better person, to get back into society, and be a better person in my community... It's huge. It's huge because I never asked for it.

*Incarcerated Participant (03)*

My case manager gives me hope and she inspires me. I don't hear that or see that from all the case managers. My case manager was at receiving the day I got here. One of the things she said to me, and I'll never, ever, ever forget it, was "I'm here to help you get out of here." I'm like, Just look at that. "I'm on your side. What do you need me to do?" She inspires me. It gets down to one simple thing in my opinion. I see these people as wonderful people because they give a [expletive]. They care about what happens to you, they care what happens to me, or this person. They care. You can see it, and it's not phony. They truly care. *Ronnie, Incarcerated*

# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Communication Between Staff and Incarcerated People

Good communication and fair treatment are two important ways that incarcerated people experience "respect" from staff. However, many express frustration with the lack of clear communication and inconsistent treatment from staff members. Incarcerated people live in an environment of high uncertainty and low control. Therefore, having information about what is happening, what will happen, and why decisions are being made is very meaningful to many of them.

You have to communicate with the offenders – especially during COVID. I feel this has been crucial. They want you to pass the phone to the next offender. If you're tied up at the moment "Hey, we're feeding. As soon as I'm done feeding, I'll pass it." That simple communication when you're locked behind a cell door and you have no control over your life, if you don't tell an offender, "Hey, give me five and I'll pass the phone" they're gonna cause a problem. To you and me, that's just a phone. But to them, that's their lifeline to the outside.

*Officer, Early Career*

Currently, only 13% of survey respondents say that staff in their unit explain their decisions to them. Less than half say that staff at SCF treat them with respect. On the other hand, a number of interview respondents noted that they appreciate staff members who let them know what is going on and take the time to explain decisions.

Talking to the nurses, to the staff, I feel bad for them. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand's doing, so it's a constant chaos, not only for us. We don't deserve all the information. You know I mean? If communication was just a little bit greater than what it was, I know a lot of us in my unit would be more at ease if we just knew just a little bit. You cancel this, but there's no explanation of why you canceled this. "Sorry, fellas, but such and such happened. This is why." Security reasons, I understand all that, but when it comes to leaving us in the dark, it's really, really hard.

*Javier, Incarcerated*

**Research Note:** The views of incarcerated survey respondents are more favorable toward staff "in their unit" than generally. This suggests that being together more often and more consistently may lead to more layered, humanized relationships between incarcerated people and staff.

### Interactions between Incarcerated People and Staff



# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## "Us Versus Them" Dynamics Are Pervasive

While interactions that involve an assault or a use of physical force are fairly uncommon, more common negative interactions with correctional staff include (for incarcerated people) staff raising their voice at or threatening them, confiscating their personal belongings, giving orders that are perceived by incarcerated people as inconsistent or unfair, or enforcing unexpected changes without clear communication. On the whole, both incarcerated people and correctional staff at SCF describe an "us versus them" mentality at play much of the time. Many of those we interviewed expressed a desire to overcome this mentality to develop more positive and supportive relationships inside the prison.

## Positive Interactions Are Also Common

Overall, survey and interview data show that, currently, interactions between incarcerated people and correctional staff are mixed. The chapter of this report

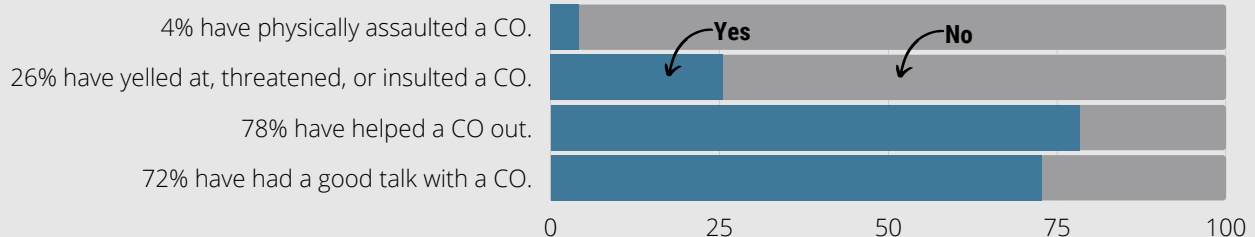
called "The Prison Environment" explores the frequency of violent interactions between corrections staff and incarcerated people. However, positive interactions are more common than negative ones. Both staff and incarcerated people are more likely to say they have helped one another out or "had a good talk" than to say they have assaulted or yelled at each other.

What encourages me and inspires me is the shift of the way people are seeing prison. A lot of times, the shift that I see, I will say in staff, for an example. I see a lot of staff coming onboard with the mentality that's not like us versus you. It's more like, "I'm here to do my job, and within me doing my job, I genuinely want to help you guys rehabilitate yourself. I want to see people get better, do better, be better."

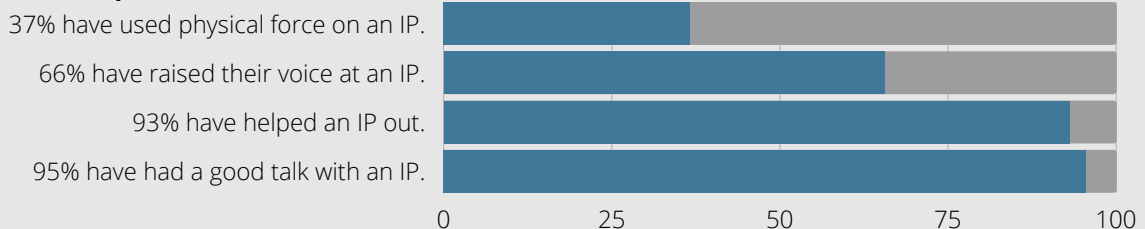
*Edwin, Incarcerated*

## Interactions between Incarcerated People (IP) and Corrections Staff

### ***Incarcerated People Report That in the Past Month***



### ***Corrections Staff Report That in the Past Month***



# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

## Breaking Old Habits

A key challenge to overcoming the divisive “us versus them” mentality is breaking old habits between incarcerated people and corrections staff. Currently, formal training and cultural norms reinforce the idea that the other side can't be trusted.

At one point in prison, there was the us versus them mentality. For a little while, I fell for it when I was new, and I was doing this, and I didn't know what was going on. That was what was taught to me. I lived that way too for a little while, but after a while, after talking and dealing with staff and being more open with people, I see that they're just people, too. This is just their job. At this time and moment in their life, this is just something they're doing. It doesn't necessarily mean it's who they are or it's what they are, whatever the case may be.

*Edwin, Incarcerated*

I think through the Academy you kind of lose some of your views. If you came into this believing that you wanted to come in and treat people in a humane way, you might have kept it that way. But some people lose that through the academy because the old school method used to be green versus blue. That's what they taught you. Basically, it was like we were at war. They were gonna compromise you and kill your wife and your kids and you were going to work to protect the world from all these felons and these bad people.

That was the old school method of teaching. I haven't been to the academy in so long I don't know how that's changed or if that's changed, but through my career I've learned that that's not exactly true and that – like we discussed before – that a lot of these guys are just human beings.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

## Understanding and Appreciation for Staff

Interviews show that incarcerated people in SCF have a nuanced view of staff members that goes beyond the “us versus them” mentality. They routinely distinguish between different types of staff members, recognize the human side of staff, and empathize with what staff are going through working in SCF. Many incarcerated interviewees also recognize that staff behave in the ways that they are trained to, and in the ways that they are expected to by the institution - expressing that they understand that staff are “just doing their job” or are constrained by the conditions of the institution.

---

A lot of times we don't take it into mind, but these officers, they're not just officers. They're husbands, they're wives, they're mothers, they're fathers, they're grandparents, and they go around here and people don't understand what they're going through. Coming here is a challenge for some of them.

*Richard, Incarcerated*

---

I've had a bunch of cool ones [COs] that I like I've shared some art with. Then you have the ones that you just can't even ask them about their day. It's weird. I guess that's what everybody in the world - There's one CO in the kitchen, he said, “I'm in prison too. Mine's just bigger.” [laughs] I was like, “Oh, that was cool I never thought about that way,” but that's it.

*Guillermo, Incarcerated*

---

One staff is in a unit with a hundred people and they get bombarded with questions and things like that when something goes wrong.

Then it's understandable that they get frustrated and tired of saying the same thing over and over again.

*Gary, Incarcerated*

---

# RELATIONSHIPS AT SCF

## Findings Related to the Importance of Relationships Inside and Across the Walls

- The families, friends, and community connections of incarcerated people are a key source of support, stability, and hope.
- Under SCF's current visitation and phone policies, 73% of incarcerated people say they are able to remain in touch. However, incarcerated people want more - and more meaningful - interactions with their family and others in the community. They say that maintaining relationships is challenging because of money, logistics, and technological issues.
- Mutual support among incarcerated people is common, and is also a key source of comfort and purpose. While tension and conflict are part of daily life in SCF, so are positive, supportive interactions. Incarcerated people offer one another friendship, advice, and mentorship, and also help one another by sharing resources with those in need.
- Relationships with corrections staff are also important to incarcerated people. While incarcerated people report a lot of negative interactions with staff, they report many positive interactions as well. Staff make a big difference for them by helping them prepare for re-entry, by ensuring that they get their needs met inside, recognizing their achievements, or simply treating them with respect and humanity.
- Incarcerated people wish for better communication from staff, and more fair, consistent treatment. They acknowledge an "us versus them" mentality among both staff and incarcerated people, as well as a desire for more positive, supportive relationships.
- Incarcerated people report better, more positive relationships with staff in their unit, suggesting that more consistent interaction between corrections staff and incarcerated people may reduce conflict.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Expand opportunities for incarcerated people to maintain contact with friends and family on the outside, including opportunities to have prolonged contact and physical interaction.
- Find ways to support mutual aid and cooperation among incarcerated people, and between incarcerated people and staff. Models for these structures already exist in SCF.
- Improve communication with incarcerated people wherever possible.
- Find ways to disrupt the "us versus them" mentality, such as keeping staff teams in consistent assignments with the same incarcerated people on a regular basis.

# IMAGINING CHANGE AT SCF

## Working Toward Change at SCF

The purpose of this report is to help prison administrators, corrections staff, and incarcerated people make changes at SCF that reduce harm and improve the wellbeing of people who live and work there. To do this, we must understand what staff and incarcerated people imagine – and what they find difficult to imagine – for the future. In addition, we explore current attitudes toward change, as well as what participants view as the barriers to change.

## What Do We Imagine?

We asked research participants at SCF what changes they would prioritize if they had a magic wand and could fix anything they want. Across interviews and related survey items, there were some clear areas of agreement between corrections staff and incarcerated people about which changes would be beneficial to life at SCF.

- **Increase rehabilitative and pre-release programming for incarcerated people, including educational programming, vocational programming, and mental health and substance abuse treatment.**
- **Address critical staffing levels so that staff can work reasonable hours and focus on their core job responsibilities, and so that incarcerated people**

**can receive all of the services they need, including essential medical and mental health services.**

- **Improve the quality of interactions and communication across the facility, including improving relationships between corrections staff and incarcerated people.**
- **Examine accountability structures for corrections staff and for incarcerated people. Ensure that there are fair and consistent consequences when harm is caused, but also ways to learn and grow from mistakes.**

Many incarcerated people painted detailed pictures of an organization that would care for, teach, and correct them based on their individual needs and goals. Some articulated this as an intensive curriculum of programs to help them gain education, life skills, and vocational skills. Others described it as a continuity of care, in which correctional officers would be case managers, counselors, and teachers guiding them in meeting goals based on their needs. Still others imagined "a world inside a world," where they could earn money, pay rent, make their own food, wash their own clothes, and practice for reentering society. Regardless of their vision for how to best get there, many incarcerated people envisioned incarceration as a way back to society, complete with opportunities to rejoin their community once they attained the goals set out for them.

I may be walking and one of the guys that's been locked up for a long time would say, "I went to work today for 10 hours at the chicken farm, and I'm able to pay for this and I'm able to pay for that. I finally bought me a TV after 10 years and it feels good." You would go to education and there would be dozens or hundreds of people on the computers, working on whatever they felt their needs were. They were doing the things that will make them better without worrying about who's in what class and who's doing what. Everybody would be in a room by themselves, not just the people that were cool with the officers and knew how to play the game. We would all have an opportunity to go home, no matter what you did in the past, as long as you had the right behavior and you could show that and you've taken the things that you need to do. It doesn't matter how horrible your crime was, you would still have a chance to go home. *Jake, Incarcerated*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms similar in origin to the names of research participants. See Appendix A for more details.

# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

Correctional staff largely agree with and support the vision of the prison as a rehabilitative training ground. 85% of staff at SCF indicated via survey that they support reforms to increase or improve programs that help incarcerated people prepare for re-entry, and 83% reported support for expanding job training opportunities for incarcerated people.

We should be providing them with opportunities to become functioning members of society and teaching them trades, teaching them how to take education, giving them the opportunities to move into a university setting, whatever it would take to not just get out but to get out, get a job, and become a part of society that is productive and not a drain, not selling drugs, not doing all these other things that really hinder our society. So, if we really, truly want to move forward, then we're going to have to embrace the idea that we're not housing criminals, but we're training citizens.

*Educator, Mid-Career*

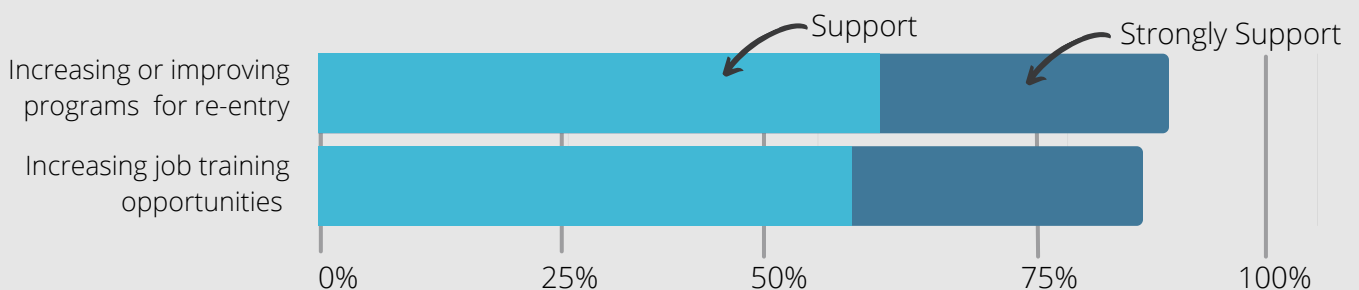
Yes, it would be less time. It would definitely be less time. It wouldn't just be less time though, it would be a more empowering time. It would be more of genuinely trying to bring out the best in people. It would be more like -- trying to help people figure themselves out, figure their purpose out, figure their skills out. It would be more of a rehabilitating time... We've been doing this for a long time, man. We haven't seen a progression for the better. When does that eye-opening moment happen? When does it change? What does it look like? To me, it looks like not incarcerating people for long sentences with no rehabilitative or correctional purposes.

*Edwin, Incarcerated*

I feel like we incarcerate so many people, and I think that that in itself needs to change. That's a systemic issue, but also we know that they go out, and half of them commit crimes to come back in, and that is the true shame. If we are corrections, if we are that, then what are we doing to help correct? I really feel like this is an opportunity to start being something that helps give these incarcerated the tools that they need and hopefully also the impetus to make change.

*SCF Manager*

## Corrections Staff Support for Re-Entry Programs and Job Training






# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## Correctional Practices and Care

In addition to expanding access to educational and vocational programming, incarcerated people that we spoke with imagined additional changes relating to their daily lives, including the following:

- **Ensure that everyone has an equal chance to progress, to participate in incentive structures, and to access desirable living arrangements, programs, and work assignments.**
- **Expand access to medical care, mental health, and substance abuse treatment.**
- **Increase safe access to technology and the internet so that they are prepared to live and work in a technological world.**
- **Improve ways to connect with their families and with the community.**
- **Help them to eat better, sleep better, and have more privacy.**
- **Examine living arrangements and organizational structures inside the prison to optimize resources and offer the best possible support to those with specific needs or goals (e.g. allow those with similar needs or goals to live together and build communities of care).**
- **Offer greater freedoms that do not increase security risk (e.g. allow pictures on walls, allow incarcerated people to do their own laundry, bring food back to their units from the chow hall, and give items to their peers when they are released).**

For most incarcerated people we spoke with, equality of opportunity was of particular importance – that reforms would benefit everyone, not just select groups. There is a widespread sense that “who you know” dictates what opportunities you have access to, and that some groups get more privileges than others.



---

[If I had a magic wand] I'd make it to where everybody would have the choice to normalize and buy clothes or have the equipment back porches. Everybody would be able to have flowers in their cell. Everybody would be able to go and speak with the warden instead of just one person out of a hundred or one group out of 20. Every person would have the opportunity once a month to be able to speak with the captains or with the warden. Equality because not all of us have those rights, really.

*Jose, Incarcerated*

---

# IMAGINING CHANGE AT SCF

## Staff and Management Practices

In addition to improving staffing levels and re-examining staff accountability structures, corrections staff expressed consistent support for the following changes related to their role as workers and leaders at SCF.

- **Remove or reassign staff who put others at danger by bringing in drugs, instigating conflicts, or just regularly neglecting their job responsibilities**
- **Develop the corrections workforce so that SCF can hire people who want to work there and who want to contribute to a positive and proactive environment.**
- **Improve support for staff by clarifying their roles, clearly communicating mission critical information on a daily basis, and providing training and support, including support for occupational health.**

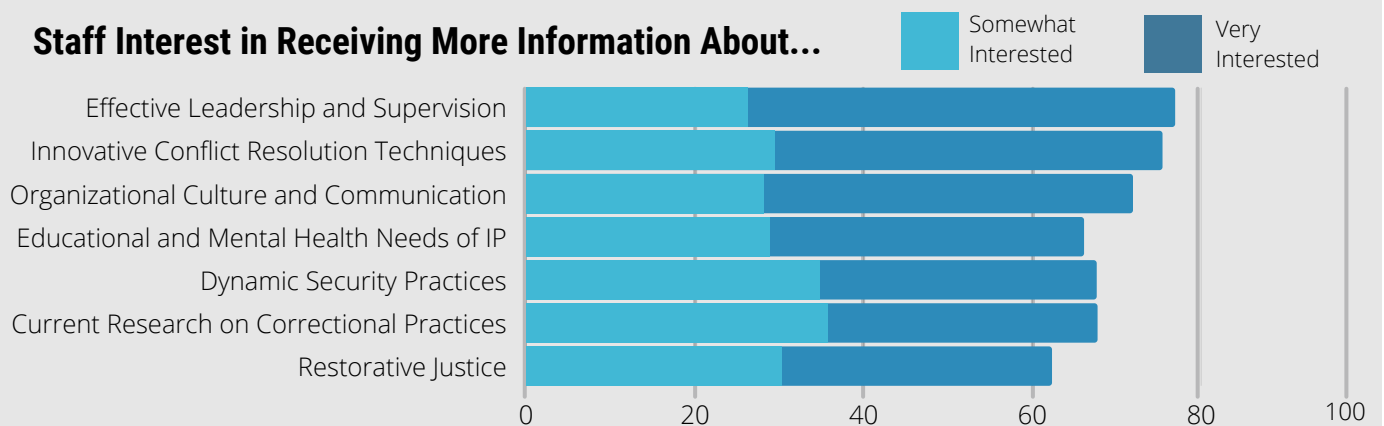
Both corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF identified “improving communication” as a top need facility-wide: communication between management and staff, between staff, between staff and incarcerated people, and between incarcerated people. The majority of staff surveyed are interested in learning more about leadership and supervision, conflict resolution, and organizational culture and communication.

I feel like if I could magically get rid of all of the dirty staff, my life would be a bunch easier. I think that’s what I would wish for. Those people are the ones that make my life hard. Those people are the ones who are bringing in drugs to these offenders and creating problems for them. *Sergeant, Mid Career*

In addition, approximately one-third of staff expressed strong interest in learning more about the educational and mental health needs of incarcerated people and leading-edge correctional practices, including dynamic security and restorative justice.

Cross-item analysis of survey responses suggest a small cohort of corrections staff who are “not at all” interested in learning more about any of the topics offered in the survey, pointing to the likelihood that there is a group of staff not ready to engage with potential training initiatives, regardless of their focus.

## Staff Interest in Receiving More Information About...



# IMAGINING CHANGE AT SCF

## Conflicting Beliefs About Correctional Reforms

We have established that staff widely support educational and vocational programming for incarcerated people. By survey, most staff also indicated support for offering more or better incentives for incarcerated people who show growth. However, other changes are more controversial. About a third of staff support updating living units and common areas to be more comfortable, or allowing more freedom of movement within the prison (as long as safety is attended to). Less than 15% of staff indicated support for relaxing the dress code for incarcerated people, a recent change that was implemented at SCF.

When discussing the changes they envision for SCF, corrections staff identified some key conflicts that give them pause. These include (1) a desire to make sure that any changes do not jeopardize safety behind the walls, (2) a desire to ensure that prison remains a deterrent, and (3) a desire to honor what they perceive to be the wishes of crime victims in Colorado.

### Safety First

Corrections staff at SCF express concern that some correctional reforms may put safety at risk - their own safety, as well as the safety of colleagues and

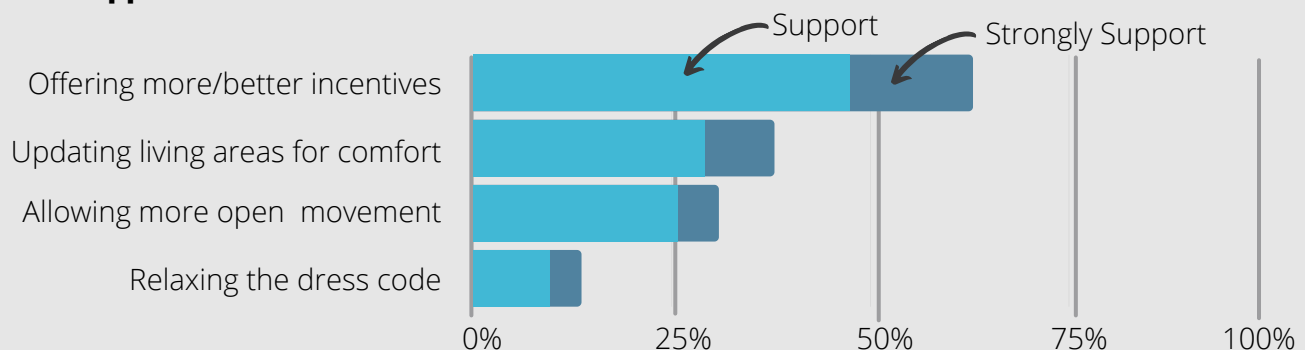
incarcerated people. A significant majority (81%) of corrections staff surveyed perceive that "recent changes at SCF have made their jobs more dangerous." In interviews, staff primarily expressed concern that there are no longer sufficient consequences for incarcerated people who cause harm, particularly those who assault staff or other inmates. It is clear from interviews that many staff have a desire to hold incarcerated people accountable.

I like open movement. I'll be honest with you. I think it relieves a lot of stress on staff.

I think it's good. A lot of these are progressive moves and I like them. But on the other hand, they got to give us back some – how do I say to say it? – some ways to deal with these guys. 15 days in restrictive housing for murder? Hey, that's not right. You know, when you murder or have an assault in prison, these guys need to be held accountable, and so you need some ways to hold them accountable. They may assault staff, they should be held accountable. It shouldn't just be a 15-day stint in the hole.

*Sergeant, Mid Career*

## Staff Support for Correctional Reforms



# IMAGINING CHANGE AT SCF

## *“This isn’t the Holiday Inn”*

Safety aside, there is widespread disagreement among staff over what privileges should be afforded to incarcerated people. Many staff expressed a perception that offering too many nice things will undermine the deterrent effect of prison – in short, that if prison is too comfortable, no one will want to leave. Staff generally reject the notion of the prison becoming a hotel, country club, or retirement home.

In interviews, some staff expressed frustration with this idea and did not feel it is supported by evidence. Many staff pointed out the benefits of incentive structures and privileges. However, staff also described them as a double-edged sword with both risks and rewards. In all, **85% of corrections staff at SCF say that “the people incarcerated here are given too many privileges.”**

---

Anything you bring in that makes the offender have a – I don’t wanna say enjoyable time, but – it makes it easier on staff too. Every time we communicate with them, if they’re in a better mood it generally goes better for staff as well. Then again, you pick up one end of the sword, you get the other. Anything that you give to these offenders, we have to be accountable for. The more and more we give, the more and more hard work it is for us. And so, a lot of staff are like, “Stop giving them stuff. I can’t keep up.”

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

---

## Corrections Staff on Incentives and Privileges: Three Points of View

We give them everything that they want. Who wouldn’t like three hot meals and a cot and everything paid for? It’s like a retirement community. There’s really no reason not to come to prison. When kids see this kind of stuff and hear about it, it’s like hey, I got video games in my cell. I get to watch TV. I get to hang out and do absolutely nothing. Why not?

*Lieutenant, Late Career*

You have people that actually have said, “If you start letting prisoners have yard sales or food from outside sources or get to do this, then what’s the deterrent to come to prison?” Well, the deterrent to come to prison is you lose your freedom, period. Coming to prison is a punishment. Nobody is gonna say that because you got Pizza Hut to be able to deliver pizzas that that makes it worth going to prison.

*SCF Manager*

Giving the inmates more stuff to do, I think that is a positive. More incentive -- like our incentive unit, like ping-pong tables and video games -- that keeps them occupied. They don’t think about doing bad things, doing drugs or whatever. They have something to do good for. I think that’s helping a whole lot. But not everybody should be afforded all those, [only] people that do good and not try to stab us.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## ***Carrying the Victim's Burdens***

Finally, staff are conflicted over whether offering certain privileges and opportunities is "fair" or "right," particularly with crime victims in mind. In interviews, many expressed concerns that letting incarcerated people have too many comforts or nice things would be disrespectful to victims and others in the community. They even wondered whether emerging work programs -- like those that allow incarcerated people to make minimum wage in the community and send money home to their families -- are "wrong," given that their primarily living expenses are covered by the state.

While recent surveys of Colorado crime victims suggest that most victims do want rehabilitation over punishment for people who are in prison, correctional officers still struggle with how to draw respectful boundaries.

## **Findings from the Victim's Speak Survey**

In 2016, the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition commissioned an independent survey of 500 crime victims in Colorado and found:

- By a 4-1 margin, crime survivors prefer that Colorado focus more on rehabilitating than punishing people who commit crimes.
- By a 3-1 margin, victims believe education, treatment, employment, and housing programs will be more effective than incarceration at preventing crime.
- By a 5-1 margin, crime survivors prefer shortening prison sentences and spending the savings on rehabilitation to increasing the length of prison sentences.

"If I could wave a wand, I'd want to wave it into more of a rehabilitation, but I really want to make sure that the victims felt that it was rehabilitation and not something different. I think there's a lot of anxiety for us staff when we feel like we have to carry the victims' burdens with us ... I just hope that it would be honoring that event, not discounting it. But that's so hard to talk about [what a victim would want] because I don't feel it's appropriate. Like, I'm not in that space and it's not happened to me.

It's much more complex than people give the prison system credit for, because there's that stereotype -- you just have to be void of common sense and fear, you just have to walk with a baton, and you can do this job well. And you can't. You just can't do it well unless you are really engaged in being uncomfortable, having uncomfortable thoughts. If your child, if your son was incarcerated, how would you want them to be treated? Like, if a loved one that you really loved was incarcerated, how would you want them to be treated? And then, on the other end of that spectrum, if your daughter was killed, how would you want me to treat that individual? The bottom line is that's not a hypothetical question. I deal with that every day, so that's tough.

I guess if I had a magic wand, I guess that would be it, to change the perception [about us as staff], and then also just really take a look at how victims -- I don't even want to say, because I don't think you could ever come back from that. I know I couldn't. I just know I couldn't. I would never be the same person -- but how they can be as healthy as possible. *SCF Manager*

# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## Substantive Over Superficial Reforms

In interviews, some incarcerated people addressed the beliefs of correctional officers about various changes, demonstrating awareness of the conflicting opinions on what they need or deserve.

---

Listen, this PlayStation is important. It sounds bad on the street. You're in prison and playing video games. There's nothing to do. If you have no programs, keep guys off the poker table, keep guys out of the yard, keep guys away from this [congregating] where they get together and think stupid thoughts. Put a controller in their hand and let them play a PlayStation. I've seen it. The hall empties. Everybody's busy doing this.

They are in their cell quietly playing their game.

*Nick, Incarcerated*

---

In particular, they described appreciation for some of the freedoms and incentives that have recently become available at SCF, for instance, the ability to leave their unit in a t-shirt and shorts rather than in full uniform and the ability to move freely on the yard during greater portions of the day.

---

It's a huge relief to be comfortable. I don't have to wear a uniform and march around in boots. There were times when we had to walk in one direction to the chow hall and all kinds of things like that. Those things mean a lot to me.

*George, Incarcerated*

---

However, they emphasized that these changes are surface level and that what they need most is programs, jobs, and treatment. Some described the introduction of video games as “a pacifier” or a distraction from the real issues at hand.

The dress code, I guess it's cool. What does it change? I'm just changing clothes. It don't change who I am or where I'm at. A lot of this stuff that you're dealing with, what you can wear or where you're going, to me, it's cool. All it is is a human comfort, I guess, in apparel, but I haven't progressed internally, or like I said, for me, it's about programming or training.

*Andrew, Incarcerated*

A lot of these changes are superficial. They don't really address the issues of normalcy. They don't really do that. It makes life like - it's prettier, the flowers are cool and the garden is awesome. Open movement's great. It makes life easier, but at the end of the day, it's not normal. It just made staff's job easier and it just made it look better.

*Joey, Incarcerated*

There's other things like incentives that I see, like video-games, those kinds of things don't mean as much to me or mean anything to me, actually. To me, I would rather have the ability to sign up for a correspondence course than I would want to buy a video game. Now that means a lot to some people. To me, if it means something, it's helpful, it has meaning - but it just doesn't have correct meaning to me.

*George, Incarcerated*

# IMAGINING CHANGE AT SCF

## Do You Know How Many Surveys We Have Taken in the Past?

Perhaps not surprisingly, change is viewed by some at SCF with excitement and optimism, and by others with resistance or uncertainty. Regardless of whether participants are “ready” for changes to occur, they are skeptical that they *will* occur, based on what they have experienced in the past. **Just 56% of incarcerated people and 39% of corrections staff at SCF indicated via survey that they think this research project will actually help improve conditions at SCF.**

---

Do you know how many surveys we've taken in the past? We've taken so many. We never heard anything about them. Nobody's ever said anything about them. I think the biggest difference you could make with this is if people know what's going on.

*Officer, Late Career*

---

As much as I would like to believe it, I don't think it's going to make a difference honestly. I'm glad you guys came out, but honestly, I think you guys are wasting your time. Serious, because nobody's going to break their backs or bend over backwards to try to make no difference.

*Angel, Incarcerated*

---

In interviews, multiple staff members referred to the DOC as “the Department of Change,” and expressed their sense that things are always changing but that the changes rarely stick. For some, this is a frustration to be overcome by more strategic implementation of change initiatives. For others, it is a reason to wait out any proposed changes until they go away.

At the end of the day, I've seen that pendulum swing enough times that – Oh, my goodness, I'm trying to figure out one of these days when it's going to pick a place where it'll stay for long enough, I can actually keep up.

*Lieutenant, Late Career*

I just kinda always kinda look at Sterling as – You know if you tell your kid to do a collage painting and your kid gets the little pieces and parts, they start with a little picture and stars, putting those little pieces on? And our little kid has been putting those pieces on that painting for now 20 years and it's a jumbled mess. In a sense I see Sterling as that because we always – whatever comes out, we run with it and we go hard core into it and it will fade away and it will go somewhere else but that piece never fully goes away. For us it's frustrating – for the line staff, for the offenders, it's frustrating because the offenders will see a program that's gonna get them somewhere or, you know, benefit them and they start getting into it then it just – then, you know, somebody just turns the water tap off. *Case Manager, Late Career*



# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## What Will it Require to Make Real Change?

Participants in this research described what they viewed as most important to making sustainable changes at SCF. They suggested that change will take time and require persistence, that change will be better with the input of staff and of incarcerated people, and that change will require vision, planning, communication, and support from the management team and administration.

*[We need] **support and communication**, because we got told, "Hey, we're rolling out normalization." And then, we didn't get a definition. We didn't get an idea of it, so people made up their own narratives, which were negative. It's not a swear word, but literally a curse word.*  
Lieutenant, Mid Career

*My concern is that there's not **benchmarks**. I worry that we're gonna do all this change and then something horrible is gonna happen, and instead of just going back to the last benchmark, we're gonna go all the way back to where we started.* Educator, Mid Career

*I think that the most important thing is just **honesty for everyone involved**. Being able to look at the positives and negatives of both what I said, and what everyone else has said. And being able to bring that to management and to make actual targeted changes based on that.*  
Educator, Early Career

*We need more people to come out, maintain their interest of being proactive, and try to really **forge an alliance, a bridge**... Imagine if we could bring it together. We could make something happen.* Jaden, Incarcerated

## What Will Hold Us Back?

Participants expressed concerns with a number of barriers including:

- resistance to change by the institution,
- resistance from the current corrections staff,
- resistance from the community at large,
- readiness of incarcerated people to engage positively with new initiatives.

---

*If you guys wanna be really successful with this, you need to understand why it's such a hard wall to knock down... that there are a lot of things that would feel like we're being very vulnerable on in really opening up, because it could come back that we're not doing a good job, and that's harmful. Especially when you feel like you are.* SCF Manager

---

*I'm old school. I don't have the same mentality that – the things that they teach nowadays, that's not really the way I think. Okay. End of the day, the one thing I really care about is everybody goes home safe here, everybody is freaking okay at the end of the day. Right? I don't have to do any paperwork. I'm good with that. Some of the things that they're pushing, I'm not going to lie, I'm not a big fan of.* Lieutenant, Late Career

---

Participants also expressed concerns that changes will be limited by existing sentencing laws and by the availability of funding and other resources to enact positive changes.

# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## Untapped Potential at SCF

By survey, 90% of incarcerated people at SCF say they have good ideas for making life at SCF better and 85% say they have good ideas for reducing recidivism and improving re-entry; however only 25% say their gifts and abilities are put to use in the prison.

Similarly, 78% of corrections staff say that their efforts to make improvement at SCF haven't worked out well, and only 22% say they are listened to as a correctional professional. Alternatively, 70% of staff at SCF say they fear being disciplined for voicing their opinion.

## "Just Imagine if We Could Bring it Together"

Despite the many barriers to making meaningful changes, many participants in both stakeholder groups expressed excitement, optimism, and enthusiasm for working together toward something positive. Despite the challenges, 71% of incarcerated people surveyed say they have hope for the future, and many corrections staff expressed hope in research interviews.

---

We're a very special bunch of people. I think you have to be a little bit crazy to work in a prison. We definitely don't attract the most wisest or smartest people, but I think we're all capable of learning and I think we all have big hearts. I think we might come from different sides of the table, but I think there's a meeting point in the middle and I really hope that you guys are able to bridge that gap and maybe bring us together as a staff and give us the opportunity to bridge that gap with the offenders and see what comes of it.

*Lieutenant, Mid Career*

---

The limits? There's no limit to anything. People can change, people can learn, people can grow, offenders too.

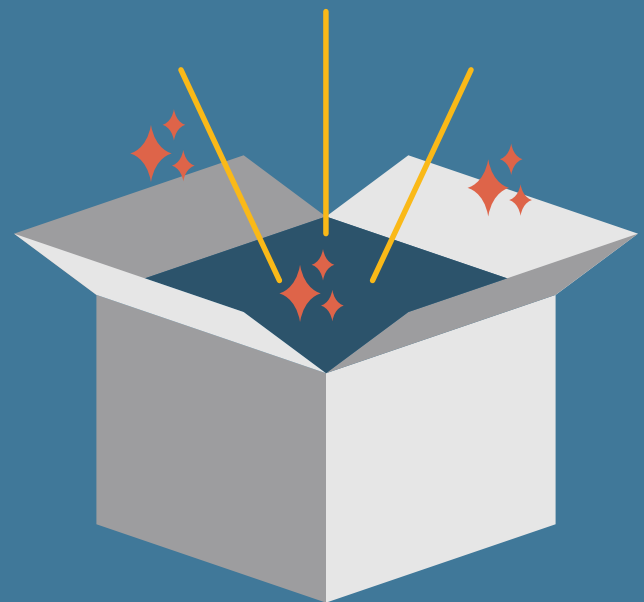
*Officer, Late Career*

I just want people to know that the vision of the prison system in Colorado can be something that no one would recognize.

*Justin, Incarcerated*

I think with enough time, energy, and positive input, there is no limit of things that could be changed. There's no limit on how good we can make this facility for everybody.

*Officer, Mid Career*



# IMAGINING **CHANGE** AT SCF

## Findings Related to Imagining Change within the Context of the Institution

- Corrections staff and incarcerated people at SCF both demonstrate high levels of support for improving the quantity and quality of re-entry oriented programs and job training opportunities, addressing critical staffing levels at SCF, improving the quality of interactions and communication across the facility, and examining accountability structures for both corrections staff and incarcerated people.
- Incarcerated people at SCF also imagine expanded access to medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, safe access to technology and the internet, better ways to connect with their families and the community, improved food, sleep, and privacy. Incarcerated people emphasize the need to provide equal opportunities for all.
- Corrections staff at SCF also imagine changes related to their role as leaders and workers, including developing the workforce, removing and reassigning problematic staff, and increasing training, support, and communication for staff.
- Corrections staff at SCF want reforms to be safe, to effectively deter people from prison, and to be respectful to crime victims. Incarcerated people want reforms to be substantive, not surface level.
- Incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF demonstrate high levels of skepticism about the likelihood of positive change. They say that positive change will require vision, planning, communication, and support, as well as everyone's efforts working together.
- Incarcerated people and corrections staff are concerned about resistance to change from the institution, from current corrections staff, and from the community at large.
- Incarcerated people and corrections staff at SCF say they have unused knowledge, skills, and talents that, if mobilized, could create meaningful changes for everyone in the institution.

## Opportunities for SCF

- Institute changes where there is high alignment and motivation to do so.
- Seek input and buy-in from all stakeholders (incarcerated people, corrections staff, CDOC administrators, and the public) to prioritize issues and identify solutions.
- Provide high levels of planning, communication, and support from the management team down.
- Discover and mobilize the skills and talents of corrections staff and incarcerated people.

# APPENDIX A: METHODS

This report presents the results of a mixed-methods research inquiry conducted by an independent research team at the University of Denver and funded by the Urban Institute and Arnold Ventures. It uses multiple sources of information - both quantitative and qualitative - in a convergent parallel design. This means that data was collected simultaneously and then analyzed convergently, seeking patterns across the different sources of data.

Three types of data were collected: administrative data gathered from CDOC official records, population-level surveys of both corrections staff and incarcerated people, and in-depth interviews of both corrections staff and incarcerated people. In addition, contextual information was gathered from departmental policy documents and onsite observations.

## Administrative Data

CDOC and SCF provided administrative records of incarcerated people and corrections staff to the research team through a formal research request. CDOC's Office of Planning and Analysis provided administrative data on incarcerated people in SCF in September 2020. These data detailed demographics, movements, gang designations, visits received, and risk assessment scores. SCF provided administrative data on staff at SCF in January 2022 that detailed positions, demographics, and years of service. In addition, the site provided trends related to assaults and incidents, and clarification of facility policy and practices. Administrative data were de-identified and entered into SPSS statistical software for analysis.

## Population-Level Surveys

The research team conducted facility-wide surveys of incarcerated people and corrections staff in October 2021. Researchers designed the surveys in partnership with project Advisory Boards and Steering Committees.

The research team visited all the units in the facility in early October of 2021 to administer the survey to incarcerated people. In each unit, they reviewed the purpose of the survey, used to inform innovation, and how participant identities would be protected. Surveys were distributed in the units for incarcerated people, and a lockbox was provided each unit for them to return their surveys anonymously. Surveys were provided in English and Spanish. The research team distributed staff surveys via email using a secure university Qualtrics platform and in hard copy, providing lockboxes for return of hard copy surveys.

Participants were given two weeks to complete surveys, after which time the research team collected lockboxes from the site. Hard copy surveys were scanned into the papersurvey.io software program to create a dataset. Data were uploaded into SPSS statistical software for analysis of frequencies and correlations.

## In-Depth Interviews

Finally, the research team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with incarcerated people and corrections staff between March and August 2021. Incarcerated participants were recruited by snowball sampling through the Incarcerated Persons Advisory Board. Board members were asked to recommend someone that was "like them" and someone else that was "unlike them." Recommended subjects were then approached with interview requests which they could accept or decline. After the initial interview sample was established, the research team conducted targeted outreach any underrepresented groups. The research team made explicit efforts to stratify the sample demographically so as to approximate the characteristics of those incarcerated in SCF, considering race, gender identity, age, security classification, and location in the facility.

# APPENDIX A: METHODS

The research team invited all corrections staff at SCF to participate in an in-depth interview via email. Those that volunteered were asked to recommend others with “good insight” who might be interviewed. The research team then using snowball sampling from these recommendations to locate other staff interview subjects. Again, attention was paid to the characteristics of the sample, and the research team conducted targeted outreach to underrepresented groups, considering gender, race, rank, and tenure.

All staff interviews were conducted via phone or Google Meets while SCF was closed to volunteers between March and May 2021. Interviews with incarcerated people were conducted one on one with a research team member via Google Meets or in person at SCF between June and August 2021. No one else was present in the room at the time of the interview.

Interviews were recorded using a handheld recorder, transcribed into text, de-identified, and uploaded into Dedoose qualitative coding software. Research team members used thematic coding to identify common themes in each set of qualitative interviews, coding interviews with corrections staff and with incarcerated people separately.

The research team assigned pseudonyms to all incarcerated interview participants by entering their names into an online name generator which produces a list of similar names, and selecting a name similar in origin. Staff subjects are identified in the report by their rank and tenure in SCF. To improve confidentiality, we provide three staff tenure categories: early career (0-5 years), mid career (6-15 years), and late career (16+ years). SCF managers who are quoted in this report are not identified by their tenure because there are only ten managers in the facility. To protect confidentiality, their quotes are simply attributed to “SCF Manager.”

## Data Triangulation and Synthesis

In the final phase of data analysis, the principal investigators examined the findings from each source of data for patterns, seeking congruence, contrast, and context. In other words, we organized data fragments by theme (e.g. interactions with management, prison conditions, etc.) and explored how the various data sources - facility records, survey responses, and interview themes - contributed to a common understanding of each topic. Often, one data source helped to contextualize another. For instance, interviews often offered further explanation of survey findings. Sometimes data sources provided contrasting views of a topic, such as when the perspectives of line staff, managers, and incarcerated people differed. This report retains areas of disagreement between data sources and between interview subjects, as these may important areas for further exploration.

Finally, we engaged in a form of “member checking.” This is a process by which research participants are given an opportunity to provide feedback on findings and to confirm that their voice has been accurately represented. In February 2022, a draft of this report was shared with the Advisory Boards and Steering Committees associated with this project and any edits requested by those groups were incorporated into the final version of this report. It is our hope that all voices have been represented here.

## Study Contacts

For more information about the study design, consent processes and data sharing agreements, data collection procedures, data privacy, and the data analysis techniques applied, please contact the principal investigators at the University of Denver:

- Dr. Jeffrey Lin [jeffrey.lin@du.edu](mailto:jeffrey.lin@du.edu)
- Dr. Shannon Sliva [shannon.sliva@du.edu](mailto:shannon.sliva@du.edu)