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## High stress, low glamor: correctional officers struggle to keep workplace strains from affecting their families

**DAVID CRARY**  
AP National Writer

WEST SENECA, N.Y. (AP) - The commute takes about 40 minutes, from the notoriously tough state prison at Attica to Mike Verrastro's pool-and-patio-equipped home in this middle-class Buffalo suburb. Two different worlds, but the veteran correctional officer ruefully acknowledges the difficulty keeping them separate.

He sometimes catches himself yelling at his 12-year-old son in the tone he uses to berate inmates. Even at the dinner table, he occasionally speaks the crude language of the cellblocks. One incident, in which an HIV-positive inmate spat a mouthful of blood into his face, caused months of anxiety for him and his wife.

“People say you've got to leave your job at work, it sounds good, but it's not easy,” Verrastro said. “A lot of times I yell and scream, and my kids look at me like I'm nuts.”

Verrastro, 42, enjoys the camaraderie of his co-workers, and knows his job is more secure than many in an economically struggling region. Overall, however, he shares the dim view of many in his field, that guarding inmates is dangerous and thankless work, fueling stress that inevitably affects an officer's family.

The consequences for those in the profession can be severe, including higher-than-normal rates of alcohol abuse, illness, depression and divorce. Florida's corrections department, as part of an appeal for employees to try stress-reducing meditation, said correctional officers' life expectancy is 16 years less than the national average.

Staff morale problems have surfaced across the country.

In Oklahoma, where starting annual pay is less than \$21,000, the state prison system has 500 vacant positions. Officers in Texas are upset by recent moves to virtually eliminate overtime pay. Vermont is struggling with high turnover; about 40 percent of its correctional officers resigned or were fired last year. Extensive use of sick leave has caused budget problems for many states.

Officers ``have an us-against-them mentality, they feel very isolated and alienated from most of society," said John McCann, a former New York City correctional officer who is now a Long Island-based psychologist specializing in stress management.

``Their stress is significantly higher than other public safety jobs because of the confinement," McCann said. ``There's no break in it. ... You become very cynical, very hyper-vigilant. You never relax."

The tension can affect officers' spouses; McCann said they suffer stress-related headaches and stomach ailments at more than twice the rate of the general population.

In contrast to police officers and firefighters, correctional officers rarely gain public attention for doing something right, for their day-to-day efforts to defuse tensions among society's most violent outcasts. When officers do make the news, usually they are the victim of an assault or uprising, or are accused of some egregious wrongdoing \_\_, battering or sexually assaulting inmates, accepting bribes that abet inmate misconduct.

Yet even the American Civil Liberties Union, which frequently takes the side of inmates complaining of abuse, empathizes with the vast majority of officers who do their jobs properly.

``The pay is horrible, the working conditions are inhumane," said Kara Gotsch of the ACLU's National Prison Project. ``The conditions we protest that prisoners have to live in are just as bad for the officers."

Verrastro has been a correctional officer since 1988, working the past 15 years at Attica, yet his wife, Donna, says she didn't fully comprehend the job's challenges until she took a tour of the maximum-security prison eight years ago offered to staff families.

``I never appreciated what he went through, the intimidation of the whole atmosphere," she said. ``It's all dark, very sad. I don't know if I could do that work every day."

Not even the tour prepared her for the trauma of February 1999, when a rebellious inmate, bleeding from the face as he battled officers, spat a mouthful of blood into Verrastro's face.

The inmate was HIV-positive and had other infectious diseases. Although doctors told Verrastro that chances of getting infected were remote, he was put on medication, advised to practice safe sex, and endured nearly a year of anxiety before receiving definitive assurance of good health.

``I had a real hard time adjusting," Verrastro said. ``I still get nightmares about it, even to this day."

His wife described the incident as ``life-altering", making her less confident in the state bureaucracy and more worried about her husband's well-being.

``Now it makes Mike's confrontations more intense, you don't know when it's going to happen again," Donna Verrastro said.

“Police and firefighters are recognized as heroes,” she added. “It’s not as glamorous to be a correctional officer.”

Judy Smith can empathize. She was a correctional officer from 1988 until 2002, when she was brutally beaten by an inmate who cornered her in a partly constructed dishwashing room at the medium-security Oneida Correctional Facility in Rome, about 175 miles east of Buffalo.

“He just started pounding me as hard and as fast as he could. ... grabbing my hair, smashing my face into the dish machine,” Smith said in a lengthy, emotional telephone interview. “I was screaming, praying to God someone would hear me. I couldn’t do anything else. I couldn’t see because of the blood.”

Other officers finally came to her rescue. Smith sustained a skull fracture and a deep loss of self-confidence that prompted her to retire.

“Sometimes it all comes back to me and overwhelms me, and I have no control over it,” she said. “I’m not the person I was. I stutter sometimes, my thoughts get lost. It’s hard to deal with that.”

Her husband is also a correctional officer at Oneida; Smith said her trauma has hardened him.

“He doesn’t talk to me as much about things at work,” she said. “And he won’t let me talk about what happened, which bothers me, because I think we need to talk. But I don’t push it.”

With a psychologist’s help, Smith, 41, has tried hypnosis in a bid to regain confidence. She has not yet sought other work, though she may enroll in computer courses.

Smith has four children, ages 10 to 19. She initially told them her injuries resulted from an accidental slip, and was disappointed by the reaction of the older ones when they did learn the true story.

“They didn’t ask much about it,” Smith recalled. “They said, ‘Get over it.’” Even before the attack, Smith found child-raising and prison work a difficult match.

“You’re harder on your kids,” she said. “You don’t let them go off with their friends as easily as someone else who’s never worked in a facility.”

Verrastro recounted similar challenges raising his daughter, now a 19-year-old college freshman, and his 12-year-old son.

“Sometimes I talk to my son like he’s a convict. I start raising my voice, ‘Put your skateboard away’, and if he doesn’t do it, I get aggravated,” Verrastro said. “That’s not right. I catch myself every day doing stuff like that.”

He also admits to using crude language at home more often than he or his wife would like, and to feeling a degree of job-related wariness.

“I'm always thinking someone's trying to put something over on me,” he said. “I go in a restaurant, and I want my back to the wall, facing the door. I should be able to go in and have a meal with my family and not worry who's behind my back.”

Like most of his 19,300 colleagues, Verrastro belongs to the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, whose president, Richard Harcrow, has been trying to increase the availability of stress-reduction programs and confidential counseling for his members.

“You're in there with problem people, all day long you solve all the problems,” said Harcrow, formerly an officer at Attica. “Now you go home; your wife and kids have problems. You've had enough at work. You don't want to deal with them at home. You turn yourself off, and that just makes things worse.”

Harcrow calls correctional officers “the forgotten cops” \_ constantly struggling to keep their wages on par with those of law enforcement officers. Several officers a year commit suicide, Harcrow says, and roughly 10 a week are attacked by inmates.

Wages for union members range from roughly \$30,000 to \$50,000 \_ adequate in some recession-hit upstate communities, less manageable in more costly counties near New York City.

New York's Department of Correctional Services has sparred with the union over numerous issues; negotiations have failed to renew a contract which expired in 2003. But department spokesman James Flateau echoed Harcrow's language by describing correctional officers' jobs as “the toughest that New York asks of any of its employees.”

The department offers employee counseling at each prison for problems such as stress, substance abuse and marital strains, Flateau said, and has proposed programs to improve officers' overall physical health.

In Washington, D.C., correctional officers have a knowledgeable champion in Rep. Ted Strickland, D-Ohio, who formerly worked as a psychologist at a maximum-security prison and who founded Congress' correctional officers caucus.

“Most people drive by a prison with no awareness of what happens inside,” he said. “The people who work there, by and large, are very conscientious ... but the day-to-day routine can have a wearing effect on anyone.”

A 2000 National Institute of Justice study found that many correctional officers refuse to answer their home telephones, dreading a request to work overtime. It also found that officers often reply evasively when asked their occupation.

Verrastro mused on one of the job's inherent drawbacks.

“You work eight hours a day, but you get no satisfaction out of the product,” he said. “If you're a construction worker, you build a house and you can stand back and say, 'That's really nice.' In my profession, you don't get that.”