



# POLICY ISSUES

## Gender and Correctional Officers

Historically, male officers worked in men's prisons and females worked in women's prisons. Currently, correctional officers of both genders work in all types of institutions, though the practice remains controversial. Opponents of hiring female correctional officers for male prisons argue they face greater danger. In the 1970s, for example, the incidence of violence resulted in restricting female officers to work in minimum-security prisons. This policy changed in the 1990s, though some female officers still experience harassment by male correctional officers and inmates. Critiques of the practice suggest inmates are more likely to sexualize and fantasize female officers. Other arguments include lack of the physical strength needed to control violent inmates and contain confrontations. Female officers in men's prisons often report higher levels of stress compared with their male counterparts.

At the other end of the spectrum are problems related to male officers working in female prisons. A Department of Justice investigation of an Alabama prison discovered male officers were forcing women into sexual acts and watching women shower and use the bathroom. Though widespread scandals are

rare, any incident may suggest the need to restrict hiring based on gender.

Women work in many male-dominated fields, including policing. Though anecdotal instances of wrongdoing by correctional officers hint at possible problems, research shows work performance is similar and courts have determined inmate and officer gender is superfluous to correctional work. In fact, several studies show lower assault rates in men's prisons with female officers, who tend to rely more on verbal skills to control tense situations.

### Think About It

1. As a policymaker, what position would you take?
2. What are some of the legitimate concerns about having male staff supervising female prisoners and female staff supervising male prisoners?
3. How would the exclusion of male or female officers be considered discrimination?
4. Should this be a concern? Why or why not?