HOW THE PAI

CAN HELP WITH THE CORRECTIONS STAFFING CRISIS

Janelle Neary

The Corrections Staffing Crisis: How the PAI Can Help

A Research-Backed Tool to Improve Recruitment and Retention Outcomes

Corrections agencies across the country are facing a critical staffing shortage. With high turnover rates, increased burnout, and a shrinking pool of qualified applicants, many facilities are struggling to maintain safe and effective operations. Existing staffing issues were further exacerbated by the pandemic, and jails and prisons are now facing record-high vacancies. According to a 2024 report from the Council of State Governments, nearly half of U.S. corrections agencies report annual turnover rates exceeding 20%, with some surpassing 30%.

While agencies have responded with incentives like hiring bonuses and reduced entry requirements, these short-term fixes don't address the deeper challenge: identifying and retaining candidates who are psychologically equipped for the demands of corrections work. This is where the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) offers a strategic advantage.

A Deeper Look at the Staffing Challenges Corrections Agencies Face

Understaffing in corrections has only worsened in recent years, with reports indicating that the ratio of correctional officers to inmates is continuing to grow. Prison populations are rising, yet states still don't have the staff to manage this growth effectively. This puts a direct strain on officers, who now have a greater level of responsibility without receiving additional resources. In turn, this can lead to:

- A lack of inmate supervision
- Overtime budget impacts
- Employee burnout
- Larger caseloads with limited time
- Absenteeism
- Poor work performance and reduced motivation
- Fewer training and professional development opportunities

What corrections agencies are facing is more than a staffing crisis; it's a safety crisis. Without implementing new strategies and tools in the recruitment process, facilities may struggle to function properly, leaving officers in a stressful and dangerous position that they may not be prepared to handle.

The solution to this problem begins with hiring the right candidates, which is where psychological screenings play a critical role. For corrections, even minor mistakes in the hiring process can lead to drastic outcomes. Implementing psychological testing during this process helps agencies avoid hiring individuals who may possess higher-risk traits and instead select candidates who are not only qualified but emotionally equipped to thrive in high-stress environments.

The PAI: A Strategic Tool for Enhancing Recruitment and Supporting Retention

The PAI is a rigorously validated psychological assessment designed specifically for high-stakes environments like corrections. Used widely across law enforcement and public safety agencies, the PAI evaluates critical clinical and personality variables that directly impact job performance and psychological readiness. Its scientific foundation makes it particularly effective in identifying candidates who possess the emotional stability, impulse control, and stress tolerance required for demanding corrections roles.

Unlike generic personality tests, the PAI is built on decades of research and is trusted by psychologists to inform hiring decisions that affect safety, team cohesion, and long-term retention. **For agencies under pressure to fill roles quickly without compromising quality, the PAI offers a reliable, evidence-based solution.** It delivers quantifiable data that supports consistent hiring decisions across applicants, helping to reduce unconscious bias and ensures that all candidates are assessed against the same psychological benchmarks. The PAI's structure also aligns with legal and ethical standards for psychological testing in employment, reinforcing its value as a defensible component of the hiring process.

Identifying the Right Candidates Early

In today's competitive hiring landscape, corrections agencies can't afford to rely on instinct alone. By assessing traits like emotional resilience, impulse control, and stress tolerance, the PAI helps agencies identify individuals who are more likely to succeed—and stay—in high-pressure environments. This early insight is especially valuable in reducing costly turnover and training investments lost to early attrition. Rather than waiting for performance issues to surface on the job, agencies can use the PAI to make more informed hiring decisions from the outset. It's a proactive approach that aligns with the growing need for strategic, data-driven recruitment in corrections.

Building a Safer, More Reliable Workforce

Retention in corrections isn't just about keeping positions filled, it's about sustaining a workforce that can handle the psychological demands of the job over time. **By identifying risk factors such as poor impulse control, low stress tolerance, or interpersonal difficulties early in the hiring process, the PAI helps reduce the likelihood of burnout, misconduct, and early exits.** This supports a more stable workforce, which in turn improves morale, team cohesion, and institutional safety.

A Strategic Path Forward: Integrating the PAI into Corrections Recruitment

One of the PAI's greatest strengths is its ability to integrate smoothly into existing pre-employment screening protocols. It requires no overhaul of current systems—just a commitment to using data more strategically. Administered and interpreted by licensed psychologists, the PAI complements interviews and other psychological evaluations already in place, adding depth and consistency to the hiring process without adding complexity.

As corrections agencies continue to navigate staffing shortages and rising job demands, tools like the PAI offer a path to navigate and move past these challenges. By helping agencies identify candidates who are both capable and committed, the PAI supports safer facilities, stronger teams, and more sustainable staffing. **In a field where every hire matters, the PAI stands out as a smart, research-backed investment in the future of corrections.**

RESOURCES FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Along with the PAI, PAR offers a range of assessment solutions that can assist with screening and identification for potential hires. Numerous resources on personality assessment tools like the PAI, NEO Inventories, and more are also available.

References

International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2024). *The State of Recruitment & Retention: A Continuing Crisis for Policing.* https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/IACP_2024%20Recruitment%20%26%20Retention%20Survey%20Results_2.pdf

Nam-Sonenstein, B., & Sanders, E. (2024, December 9). Why jails and prisons can't recruit their way out of the understaffing crisis. *Prison Policy Initiative.* https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/12/09/understaffing/

Benchmark Analytics Staff. (2025, March 24). The corrections wellness crisis: The case for investing in officer support solutions. *Benchmark Analytics.* https://www.benchmarkanalytics.com/blog/the-corrections-wellness-crisis-the-case-for-investing-in-officer-support-solutions/#:~:text=High%20Turnover%20Rates:%20Nearly%20half,Evidence%20Based%20Policing%2C%202024).

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2023). Jail inmates in 2022—Statistical tables. *U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs.* https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/ji22st_sum.pdf

Heffernan, S., & Li, W. (2024, January 10). New data shows how dire the state prison staffing shortage really is. *U.S.A Today.* https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2024/01/10/new-data-dire-state-prison-staffing-shortage/72166165007/

Celi, T., Alarid, L. F., Dolny, M., & King-Mohr, J. (2024). Recruitment and retention of correctional staff. *Corrections Today.* https://aca.org/common/Uploaded%20files/Publications_Carla/Docs/Corrections%20Today/2024%20Articles/Recruitment-and-Retention-of-Correctional-Staff.pdf