

# IMPROVING WELL-BEING THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT & BELONGING

A Pilot Program with the  
Denver Sheriff Department

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The People Lab



HARVARD Kennedy School

Employee well-being has been linked to key organizational outcomes, including turnover, absenteeism, and productivity. More than half of U.S. workplaces offer “employee wellness” programs, but evaluations of their impact have yielded mixed results. In collaboration with the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD), we test the effect of one dimension of variation in organizational wellness interventions – peer- versus individual-focused approaches – on employee well-being among correctional officers.

## CONTEXT

Nearly 50% of frontline workers across the U.S. experience burnout and psychological distress. Correctional officers – our study population – face extremely high rates of workplace violence, role ambiguity, and emotionally challenging situations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they are also at high risk of burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, and mental health disorders.<sup>2</sup> These conditions have been linked to a range of negative physical and psychological outcomes as well as organizational consequences affecting productivity, performance, and turnover.<sup>3,4</sup>

Considering the outsized impact that correctional officers can have on the experience of the incarcerated population, understanding and improving officer well-being is a critical component in broader efforts in public safety.<sup>5</sup> Although correctional agencies often offer wellness programs, participation in these programs is typically low. One study found that only 18% of correctional officers have used their Employee Assistance Programs.<sup>6</sup>

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 A peer-focused employee wellness program designed to foster social connections among correctional officers increased feelings of being understood and job happiness.
- 2 The peer-focused wellness program also increased officers' beliefs that they share the same values as incarcerated individuals under their care.
- 3 We find a directional – but not significant – impact of the peer-focused wellness program on turnover in the 45 weeks after the intervention.

## RESEARCH

In 2021, we collaborated with DSD to test different approaches to employee wellness interventions. At the time, DSD was facing extremely high levels of burnout, stress, and turnover – even higher than published estimates of burnout in other high-stress occupations.

In a randomized experiment, all 712 correctional officers who were employed with the department were assigned to receive one of two wellness programs: an individual-focused wellness program or a peer-focused wellness program.

From February to April 2021, officers assigned to the individual-focused wellness group were sent weekly wellness prompts via email (see Table 1). These emails were short – typically less than 200 words – and encouraged recipients to reflect on their own well-being and write about their experiences in private online journals. The goal of these prompts was to encourage self-reflection and an opportunity to decompress, in line with existing status quo wellness interventions.

During the same period, officers assigned to the peer-focused wellness group were sent prompts via email that encouraged them to share advice and experiences in writing with fellow officers on an internally hosted, anonymous online platform (see Table 1). Only officers in the peer-focused wellness group had access to this platform. Additionally, after the first week, each weekly email included a short excerpt from another officer's experiences. The goal of these prompts was to foster a sense of connectedness, belonging, and group identity by emphasizing that the workplace stressors an officer may experience are not unique to them but are shared among other officers who have similar experiences.

In order to evaluate the impact of the peer-focused wellness program, we administered a survey to all employees before beginning the program, at the end of the 8-week program, and six months after the program ended. The surveys measured different aspects of well-being such as job happiness, burnout, self-efficacy, belonging, and feeling understood as well as beliefs about incarcerated individuals. We also used administrative data to evaluate the impact of the intervention on turnover in the 45 weeks after the program started.

**TABLE 1**

Examples of the weekly prompts used in each wellness program

Individual-focused wellness program	Peer-focused wellness program
A healthy body needs to have the companionship of a healthy mind. Having some time to collect our thoughts or to decompress from a hard day on the job helps us muster the strength of spirit to face our challenges.	Last week, your colleagues shared a lot of great advice that would help someone who is just starting out, including this: [shared story]. You can access more stories from fellow deputies by clicking [here].
This week, we would like you to take some time to write down what was difficult to deal with this week and how you will help yourself decompress.	As deputies, we work the toughest beat there is. Think about a time when a fellow deputy helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?
You can write a note to yourself by [clicking here]. No one at DSD will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.	You can share your advice anonymously with your fellow deputies by [clicking here].

## Mechanism Study

In a subsequent study conducted on Prolific (N = 732), we aimed to explore one potential mechanism through which peer-focused programs may improve outcomes above and beyond individual-focused programs: the likelihood of engagement. Put differently, we explored whether more people select into peer-focused programs than individual-focused programs. We randomly assigned participants, all of whom were also employed outside of Prolific, to see a peer-focused or individual-focused description of a hypothetical employee wellness program. We then asked participants (1) how much they would support their workplace's offering this program and (2) how likely they would be to participate in the program if it were offered at their workplace.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Overall, approximately 26% of employees responded to the initial survey, and 22% responded to the final survey. We examine the effect of the peer-focused wellness program, relative to the individual-focused program, on (1) different survey-based measures of well-being, (2) beliefs about incarcerated individuals, and (3) turnover.

**Employee well-being:** Assignment to the peer-focused wellness program significantly increased feelings of being understood by 0.40 standard deviations (SD), job happiness by 0.34 SD, and self-efficacy by 0.27 SD relative to assignment to the individual-focused program. We did not find a significant difference in burnout, social support, or belonging, although we see a directionally positive effect of assignment to the peer-focused program across all measures.

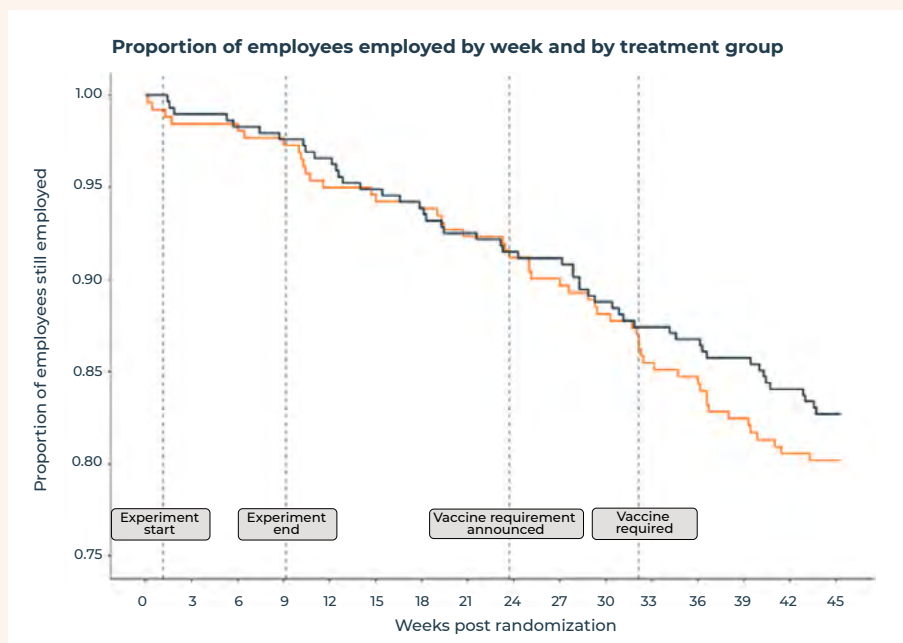
**Beliefs about incarcerated individuals:** Assignment to the peer-focused program significantly increased officers' beliefs that they share values and beliefs with incarcerated individuals, relative to assignment to the individual-focused program. We do not find any other significant differences in beliefs between the two groups.

**Turnover:** Assignment to the peer-focused program directionally reduced turnover in the 45 weeks after the program started compared to assignment to the individual-focused program (see Figure 1). While this difference is not statistically significant, it suggests a hypothesis – to be tested in the future – that peer support interventions may lead to reduced turnover and therefore cost savings in other settings.

**FIGURE 1**  
Turnover by treatment group and time

Note: Each line represents the proportion of employees who were randomly assigned to each treatment group at the start of the experiment who were still employed at DSD, by week

— Individual-focused  
— Peer-focused



## Mechanism Study

In a subsequent online study conducted on Prolific, we found that participants were significantly more likely to support and report likelihood of participating in a peer-focused wellness program, relative to an individual-focused program.

## WHAT'S NEXT

We show that peer-focused employee wellness programs may be more effective than individual-focused alternatives at improving key measures of well-being. This intervention is easily implementable and cost-effective and could be highly adaptable to various occupational settings. However, in this study we cannot measure the impact of peer-focused programs on those who actively participated, and our sample is too small to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of such programs on organizational outcomes such as turnover. Future work should try to answer these questions.

## SOURCES

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